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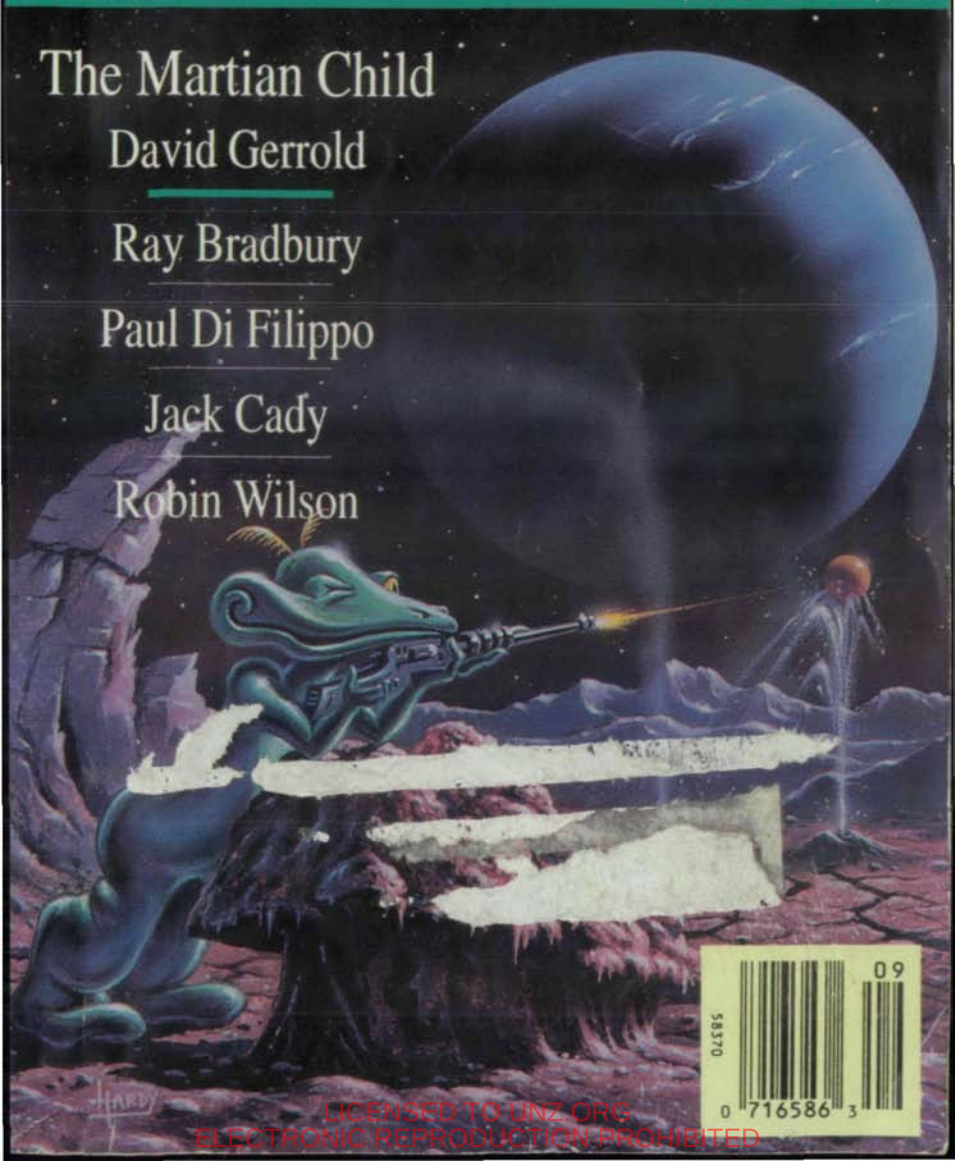

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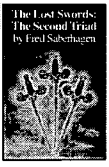

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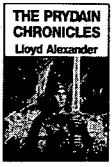

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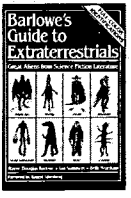

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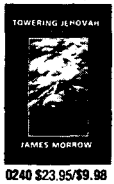

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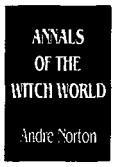

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CARTOONS: JOSEPH FARRIS (57, 72); DANNY SHANAHAN (99); JOHN JONIK (123).
COVER BY DAVID HARDY, TITLED "BHEN ON NEPTUNE'S MOON TRITON"

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 0024-984X), Volume 87, No. 3, Whole No. 520, September 1994. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.75 per copy. Annual subscription $26.00; $31.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Second class postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1994 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

GENERAL OFFICE: 143 CREAM HILL RD., WEST CORNWALL, CT 06796
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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I ADORE ESsays. I read them to relax. The best essays act like excellent fiction — they transport you into different world. *The Best American Essays 1993* begins with a wonderful essay on hair by Marcia Aldrich. She writes about the way people of different ages and social classes approach hair-styling. On my own, I would never read about hair. It doesn't seem like a fascinating topic to me. But thanks to *The Best American Essays* and Marcia Aldrich, I now have a new perspective on the subject.

My favorite form of essay is the critical essay such as the type our columnists practice here. Each practitioner uses a form of the critical essay that reflects his personality — hence Kathi Maio's are short and crisp, and Bruce Sterling's meander on fascinating sideroads. I think our book columnists are a perfect counterpoint to each other, taking over where Algis Budrys and Orson Scott Card left off. So when Rob Kilheffer approached me to do a third book column (to rotate with John Kessel's reviews), I hesitated. After all, we have at least one book column each month.

Then I read Rob's work, and realized he offered a powerful third voice, a voice that would analyse our genre with a fresh point of view. His first column, which appears in this issue, approaches the sense of wonder in a memorable way.

Rob has read science fiction since he was quite young, but he has only been active in the publishing world since he graduated from college in 1988. His first work in the sf field was for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. That connection led him to a job as assistant fiction editor at *Omni*. During his tenure at *Omni*, he also wrote for *Publisher's Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews* and *The Washington Post*. He has reviewed hundreds of sf novels.

Early this year, Rob quit his *Omni* job to become a freelance sci-

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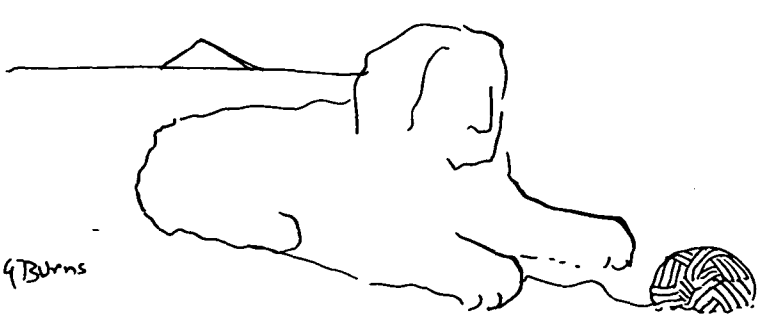
ence writer and science fiction reviewer. We are happy to have him as the third member of our book team.

Another columnist joins us this month. Paul Di Filippo has written a lot of short fiction for this magazine. He also mails gratis to his friends and acquaintances occasional bits of science fiction humor. We decided that we wanted to bottle that sf humor and share it with our readers.

The humorous essay is perhaps the most difficult form of all, and Paul is a master of it. His focus in the quarterly column will be the science fiction genre. His mission is to keep us laughing at ourselves. He gets off to a good start with a poke at John Clute and Peter Nicholl's labor of love, The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

We are pleased to welcome these two new columnists aboard. With their arrival our roster is complete. We will spice our diet of short fiction with the genre-focused essay. And perhaps someday, someone who never thought much about science fiction will find a science fiction essay in a best-of volume, and will discover a whole new perspective.

Enjoy.



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When Mark Bourne sent us this story, he added in his cover letter, "I hear that every writer feels compelled to write a 'writer story.' Here's mine."

"Great Works of Western Literature" is Mark's second sale to F&SF. His first appeared in our March 1993 issue. He has also sold short fiction to Asimov's *Fiction Magazine.*

Great Works of Western Literature

By Mark Bourne

EXHAUSTED, JESSUP SEES THE change as it happens this time. On page 1548 of *The Experience of Literature,* 3rd ed., in the chronological listing of the works of Ernest Hemingway, the title *The Old Man and the Sea* materializes in crisp, black letters. Other words on the page crawl away to make room for the new addition. Jessup flips through the dog-eared ricepaper pages to the essay "Papa and His Time" by Prof. E.C. Gwaltney, Ph.D. Jessup's margin notes and underlinings from college are still barely legible as faded pencil graffiti. Then there it is, appearing in a newly vacant part of the page: "After the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea,* a nearly flawless short novel, Hemingway was awarded the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes with a promptness that suggested an overdue recognition."

The anger bursts within him more explosively than last time, and Jessup flings the book at the shelves lining one wall of his cramped apartment.

"It's mine!" he cries for the thousandth time. "Fucking *damn* it!" He stares at his word processor's glowing screen. Blank. No point in searching

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through the hard drive's files. Sour acid rises from his stomach.

His latest work—another product of solitude, missed meals, and passion—is gone. Like the others, *The Old Man and the Sea* has been erased. No, not erased. Stolen.

Jessup kicks savagely at the books on the floor and bellows like a trapped animal. He unbars the door, yanks it open, walks stiffly down the dim hallway, and emerges into the night's cold, gray rain. The wet pavement sucks up the street lamp's oily halo, leaving no color in Jessup's view. From an open window, a radio blares. On the Sol Network, His Radiance is announcing another decree to suppress the latest uprisings on the west coast.

Jessup pounds the iron grating. The door behind it opens an inch. A tired-looking eye peers through the taut security chains.

"Whoizzit — Jessup!"

The door closes and Jessup hears the chains being unlatched. There is a moment's pause. Alya always thinks she looks like shit in the morning, so Jessup knows she is combing her fingers through her short, brown hair. The door opens. She unlocks the protective gate and pulls Jessup, shivering and dripping, into her living room.

"What're you doing out in this weather? What time is it?" She glances at the clock near the shrine. Two thirty-six. "Sraosh and Rashnu!" she swears. "What's wrong? You want some coffee? Dry yourself off, at least." She goes into the bathroom, then returns with a heavy towel and a bathrobe. The towel smells of her favorite perfume. She helps him remove his soaked shirt and pants. He puts on the robe. Alya takes his hand and guides him to the couch.

"You shouldn't be out tonight," she says, heading for the kitchen. "The Guard are ready to shoot anything that moves."

"It happened again." Jessup says it so softly he wonders if she heard it. She responds with the sounds of something being put into the microwave. A minute later, she comes out with a cup and saucer.

"Careful. It's hot." The coffee tastes awful, and she chuckles at the look on his face. "Yesterday's leftovers. You get the good stuff only when you call first. *What* happened again?"

Jessup lets the cup warm his palms. "You know that novella I've been working on? About the fisherman?"

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She shakes her head. "No."

Please, not again. "You read it last week. Said it was the best thing I've written yet."

"I haven't seen anything of yours in months." She sounds hurt. "You won't *let* me."

"But I *made* you read it. You said it moved you." Forget it. It's all been changed. Again. "You promised me you'd remember."

"No. I don't know what you're talking about." Her sincerity tempers his frustration.

"*The Old Man and the Sea*?" His voice is without hope.

"What about it?"

"Who wrote it?"

"You were the lit major." She answers his glare with a puzzled expression. "Hemingway did. Everyone knows that."

Jessup sighs. It's the same every time. Stolen, like the others.

He looks hard at her. "*The Metamorphosis*."

"What?"

"*Who wrote the fucking story*?"

"Kafka. Franz Kafka."

"*Waiting for Godot*."

"The play? Oh, wait. It's been a while...Samuel Beckett. What's this all about?"

They've had this conversation before. But of course she doesn't remember. "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*."

"My favorite poet. Eliot." She looks at him. A shadow of worry, or fear, washes across her features.

"Jessup." She touches his arm. "What's this all about? Are you all right? You've been working too hard."

It's pointless. He has explained it all to her before. But "before" is obviously a relative word. Twice now, he has told Alya everything, every absurd, unfair detail. But with each theft everything changes. So he tells her again.

For the past year or so, ideas for new stories or poems or novels have poured into him as if he were a wine glass filled to overflowing. They appear in his head complete and whole. He merely releases them through his fingers,

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the way Mozart envisioned entire symphonies before transcribing them into corporeal existence on paper. Just last week, when he showed her his latest work-in-progress, he told her how wonderful it felt to work on a piece that he knew was something special. Work? The words flow from his fingers as if he were simply taking dictation. And often, as his body aches with fatigue, tingly inner voices whisper encouragement and suggestions in his mind. A writer's subconscious editor at work loud and clear. It used to take weeks just to finish the first draft of a short story. But now —

"They practically write themselves," he says, laughing, but feeling cold and frightened all the same.

She listens as he speaks — again — of muses and inspired creation. She grows frightened when his fists beat viciously at the air over his head and he lashes out at forces he cannot name. Someone, *something* is helping him create beautiful, inspired work — prose, poetry, drama. Characters and scenes appear in his dreams. Faint voices tell him what a fine writer he is. Each new piece is the most fulfilling work he can imagine. But each time, after he types that final period, then slumbers in contented exhaustion, *something* takes his work from him. And gives it to somebody else.

No matter that that somebody lived years or centuries before Jessup was born. It doesn't even have to be a single person or time on the receiving end. Two of his fantasies, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*, are now scattered like seeds across centuries and continents, sown into the cultural loam of lands and languages that to him are totally alien. Three days after *The Odyssey* vanished from his screen, he discovered a tattered Penguin Classics edition in a used-book store. It claimed that, as with *Gilgamesh*, no one really knew how Homer's seminal tale originated. Jessup threw up in the bookstore aisle.

Nobody even remembers seeing his original manuscripts. History is being cut and pasted, and in an act of cosmic irony or bad humor, he's the only one who can see the edits.

Is he the only one so chosen? Is history being rewritten in other ways by other hands? If so, who would know it? Maybe there are dozens, hundreds of Jessups out there, doing the editing and revising and the whiting-out. The typing pool of the gods. Ha!

While writing *The Old Man and the Sea*, he recognized Hemingway's style on the growing stack of pages. He was proud that he could capture the

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clean prose of the man who wrote *The Sun Also Rises.* Last week, in bed, Alya told him that if Hemingway *had* written Jessup's "wonderful fish story," the old fart probably would have won that Nobel Prize after all. (That was before it was taken from him, so of course she does not remember saying that.)

By then, though, he had convinced himself that the thefts were real, that he was not insane. So, after saving the file for the last time, he refused to sleep, even though his body fought him for it. He opened an old anthology from his college days and, exhausted, he saw the change as it happened that time.

"I'm tired of being the ghost writer for the universe," he says quietly. He cries himself to sleep while Alya strokes his hair. She wonders if she should call a doctor.

After a while, she reaches for the TV's remote control and switches to the news channel. Even with the sound low, she can tell what is happening. Dark-hooded Reformists are shot as they pull a Sun off a neighborhood temple. One of the Guard tells the camera that His Radiance should nuke the whole movement and let "the big M" sort 'em out. Alya looks at Jessup, asleep with his head on her lap. He mumbles something unintelligible, and stirs fretfully. Poor, sweet, paranoid lover. Drunk, he once told her that he wanted his writing to change the world. Alya clicks off the TV with a grunt of disgust. No wonder he cracked.

JESSUP IS awakened by the sound of bullets shattering glass. Alya is on the floor, huddled behind a bookcase. For an awful moment, Jessup imagines she is dead.

"Alya!"

She turns her head and presses a finger to her lips. "Ssshh!"

He listens. There are screams outside. The house across the street. A man sobbing hysterically. A woman shouting. The piercing clap of gunfire. Running footsteps. Silence.

"What's happening?" he whispers.

"I don't know. The Guard. Maybe a street gang. Or Reformists. *How the fuck should I know!*"

They listen, and after a while she crawls to the window and peers between the curtains. Be careful, he wants to tell her, but the words are brittle in his throat from fatigue and fear.

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"Shit," she whispers. "The neighbors. There's a Reformist symbol burning in their yard. He was a priest." She stares through the glass a long time, then says "Shit" again, as if punctuating the world.

"Alya."

She comes to him and he embraces her, comforts her, kissing her slowly on the mouth and across her neck. She joins him on the couch and for a time the world just isn't there anymore.

Afterward, they share each other's warmth and he listens to her breathing. She smells wonderful.

"Remind me," he says, nuzzling her neck, "to tell you about the dreams I had tonight. Weird."

She smiles at him. "Was I in them?"

He isn't sure. There were so many...characters. "Maybe. There *was* a woman, a mother. She — " But the images are fog now, and don't make sense to his wakeful mind. "I don't remember." He shrugs. "Just dreams."

She looks wistfully toward the window. Her smile fades, and near her eyes are tiny lines he's never seen before. "It's times like this when I wish I were religious."

"Why?" he says. "You never use the shrine. It always looked lost in your living room."

"It belonged to my parents. They were Orthodox through and through. They believed there was a purpose for everything. That everything was supposed to be as it is. That's a comforting thought."

"Of course it is. That's what religion's all about."

"I outgrew all that before I went to college." The crack of distant gunfire pulls her eyes to the window. "They never really forgave me, I think, though they never said so out loud. Sometimes I regret not believing everything I was taught at temple. It made the world understandable."

"Is that why you studied comparative religions? To appease your parents? Or to rebel against them?"

"Both." She wraps her arms around his back and pulls him close. She grins. "They'd never forgive me for being naked next to an atheist."

"Agnostic. That's an atheist without the strength of his convictions. Kiss me."

Later, she sits up and looks at the narrow part between the curtains. "It's almost dawn. It should be all right now." She stretches her limbs — delicious!

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— and runs her hands through her hair, subconsciously arranging every beautiful brown strand.

With the remote, she thumbs on the TV. Cartoons. She leaves the sound low, then pads to the curtains and opens them a little. The earliest light of morning flows over her body.

He can't help himself. He remembers a poem he wrote for her after their first weekend together. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever," he says, putting his soul onto every word.

She turns and laughs good-naturedly. "That's corny, but sweet. You're lucky I like Keats. Thank you." She blows him a kiss.

The anger builds in him again. He fights it down. Hot burning *damn it!* That poem was among the first stolen. Why can't *that* be a dream? He grips the arm of the couch so tightly his muscles ache.

Alya's expression is changing from pleasure to concern when her left eye explodes and the back of her head blows off like a piece of eggshell. Pink and red globs spatter the wall behind her. The rest of her body, thrown back by the concussion, slaps the wall and folds doll-like into a sitting position, propped up against the shrine. Redness spews from what used to be the right half of her face, speckling the carpet and the shrine. A sleet of glass rains down onto her.

He never heard the bullet. He does not feel the tiny shards cut into his body. He only sees what's left of Alya opening up and spilling across the other side of the room. An emptying bag of blood.

As he screams, *something* slides through the jagged tear in his mind.

He doesn't hear the door burst open with the force of a huge metal-tipped boot.

The soldier gags and cups his hands over his nose and mouth. He props the door open wide, letting a chill breeze push in. Jessup ignores him. This last chapter is going really well. Wild, weird stuff from those dreams. A big ending. Part of him knows his body is hungry, and his flesh hurts everywhere, especially his hands and arms. His fingers feel like sausages. His bowels emptied out long ago. But it's been going *well* for three days now.

His numb fingers must be on autopilot, the words pour out so easily. This is his favorite work yet. Not as smoothly polished as the others, but *something* liked it as soon as it came to him. It's time to really shake things

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up, the whispers told him, with a faceless smirk. How audacious, how ballsy can you get? Jessup laughed and laughed, and the familiar tingle in his head nodded and told him yes indeed it was a fine idea and we should get on it right away, you betcha, no time to waste. Do it. For Alya.

Alya. Now where'd she go? Must thank her for letting me borrow her library to research those obscure, old myths. Wonderful woman. She's around here somewhere. Left the TV on. She must be cooking something new in the kitchen. Smells interesting. Who let the flies in?

The soldier has been saying things to Jessup. Shouting at him, punching him on the shoulder with his pistol. Jessup wishes he would go away. Can't he see I'm busy? Must wrap it up soon. There's very little space left on Alya's hard drive.

The crackle-squawk of the soldier's radio interrupts Jessup's furious typing. *Damn it!* The soldier is annoyingly distraught about some Reformist wacko holed up in a house on Victor Street. Musta shot the victim (female, dark hair, age unknown) during the trouble three days ago, then been living in her domicile ever since. Sick, twisted shit, the soldier says. Goes to show what His Radiance has been sayin' all along.

A proper ending — great stuff! — slips into Jessup's head, so he resumes typing while he thinks: they really should catch that guy. It's a mean world out there.

From the TV, a fanfare trumpets His Radiance's emergency address call. Jessup is too busy to look up, but he listens while he types. From the corner of his eye, he notices the soldier snap to attention, like a leashed dog yanked to alertness. The bald, gold-wreathed head of His Radiance speaks sonorously from across the room.

He tells Jessup and the soldier about the glory that is Mithraism and its growth since the days when, almost two thousand years ago, it prospered unrivaled among the Roman Legions. No false god could stop the rise of the Unconquered Sun.

But now, a fanatical cancer of unbelievers has forced His Radiance to take sad, but *necessary* action. The Air Guard has launched a crusade against Reformist hives on two continents. Proceed to your temple shelters immediately, he says. His headdress sparkles beneath the studio lights. From my fortress-city beneath Rome, the arms of Mithra are striking out to remove our enemies. Just moments ago, the ancient, poisonous Library of Alexandria was

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annihilated once and for all by the valiant nuclear strikeforce. Consumed by fusion's holy fire. The power of the Sun.

"The power of the Sun," parrots the soldier.

Not with a bang, but a whimper, Jessup once wrote. He snorts to himself. At least *he* won't be blamed for getting it wrong.

His Radiance speaks of duty and vigilance and the coming times of strength and sacrifice. Between keystrokes, Jessup taps the remote's Off button. He looks up to see His Radiance reduced to a tiny star on the screen, then a pinprick, then *blip!* Gone. There. Much better. Where *is* Alya? She'll love this latest work.

The soldier pivots, hoisting his gun to Jessup's head.

Though the new work is riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies, Jessup is told he can't fuss over details. But it'll be obvious that this one was cranked out in a hurry. That's all right, whispers the force guiding his fingers. You did fine work. This'll do the trick.

Jessup sighs wearily. Too bad there's no time for a second draft.

Sunlight pools on a dark clump on the floor across the room, but before he can get up to investigate, his view is blocked by the gaping mouth of a gun barrel. He places his hands back on the keyboard, watching the soldier's finger curl around the trigger. Jessup calls up the title page and smiles with quiet satisfaction. Perhaps this fellow would like to be its first reader. He looks up at the soldier and laughs. No, the moron probably can't even *spell* "New Testament."

The gun barks fire as Jessup hits the Save key.

He doesn't see the change happen this time.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Lake of the Long Sun by Gene Wolfe, Tor, 352 pages, $22.95.

Moving Mars by Greg Bear, Tor, 448 pages, $23.95.

Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone by Ian McDonald, Bantam, 133 pages, $3.99.

CRITICS often get a bad rap, especially in the science fiction field, which is so fond of its outcast position in the world of letters. This is due partly (though certainly not entirely) to misunderstandings about the role of reviewers and other commentators, so I'd like to take a moment to lay my point of view out in the open. That way we might avoid some of the pitfalls of miscommunication (and you can get upset with what I say for the right reasons, rather than the wrong ones).

Like my fellow columnist John Kessel, I'm not going to use this space for consumer-report-style reviews. It's going to be up to you to decide whether the books I discuss sound interesting enough for you to go to the bookstore and buy a copy — you won't find ratings of three-and-a-half stars or two-thumbs-up here.

I tend to be interested in the kinds of books that are frequently characterized (and decried) as "literary." But let me explain: I (and readers like me) don't read these books out of some misguided masochistic impulse. I find that the literary virtues — things like depth and complexity, resonance and creative use of language, intelligence and perspicacity — are part of a book's entertainment value, as important a part of a "good read" as a tightly wound plot, engaging characters, a colorful setting, or anything else.

I don't mean that as a warning. The books I'll discuss in these pages offer many other pleasures in addition to their literary and intellectual strengths. Bear in mind that criticism is a highly subjective endeavor.

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My comments do not pretend to any unfounded authority — you're free to disagree vehemently, and I'd be surprised if some of you didn't. My task, as I see it, is to read and respond to a text and explain *why* I responded that way as best I can.

Which is not to say that general standards are unimportant. As James Blish (writing as William Atheling, Jr.) made clear, an important part of a critic's role in the field consists of holding the field's published output up to various yardsticks of competence, encouraging a minimum level of craftsmanship and pointing out lapses. I probably won't be reviewing very many books I don't like, since I find it's much less interesting to tear down something that didn't please me, but I will try not to gloss over any reservations I have about the books I do choose to discuss.

To me, SF is a special kind of literature, with unique pleasures and possibilities, but rarely exempt from the expectations I apply to nonfantastic literature. I'm interested in viewing SF as an evolving form, and in studying the interplay between SF and the "mainstream." So you'll probably find me including a book now and then which falls on the fringes of what we think of as SF, and in such cases I'll try to explain why it's of particular interest to a genre reader.

But enough of the generalities — my biases and interests will doubtless become eminently clear as you read my first few columns.

Once upon a time (so the story goes), there was a genre that offered its readers an experience known as a "sense of wonder." It carried them to exotic distant worlds, introduced them to strange alien beings, wowed them with vast supergalactic intelligences, star-spanning empires, time travel — Big Ideas, in other words, that stretched the boundaries of the imagination, leaving the lucky reader breathless and starry-eyed.

But, the story continues, this fabled genre's innocent wondrousness became increasingly clouded by a concern for other things; in particular, things valued by those who *didn't* read the genre's works, and thus (presumably) had little appreciation for its "sense of wonder." These readers cared for a deeper examination of character, motivation and experience, and wanted smaller-scale stories in which such subtleties might matter (they often vanished on the broad cosmological canvas). They were more demanding of the prose through which their stories were told, and more interested in issues that reflected on the here-and-now — other

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worlds and alien creatures were well and good, but they had to be able to cast some metaphorical light on matters that concerned human beings living on *this* planet. So — the story concludes — our good ol' sense of wonder was lost in a confusion of literary concerns not unique to this genre, and therefore less important to this genre's purposes, leaving us in the sorry mess we face today, wonderless and sad.

To those who believe this tale of a modern Fall and our expulsion from the Eden Heinlein knew, contemporary science fiction has precious little to offer — its wonder has evaporated, or been confined more and more to the fringes, outnumbered by character-driven near-future stories striving to be more like those of *The New Yorker* than those of *Astounding*. In part, I suspect, it's at least as much a change in *themselves* these frustrated readers are lamenting as a change in the literature of the field. When we're younger, just beginning to be awed by the size of the world, its long history, its multitudinous possibilities, and not yet complacent in our ossifying worldviews, wonder is much easier to achieve. Whatever SF we encounter in our early years is new and fresh and exciting — there's no way to recapture the feeling of reading your first time travel story and trying to wrap your mind around the "grandfather paradox," or to re-experience that first startling glimpse of a bizarre alien world. It doesn't much matter whether you're reading the Asimov of the '40s, the Zelazny of the '60s, or the Gibson of the '80s, your first several SF stories are going to knock you over as no story ever will again.

But that doesn't mean nothing has changed in the genre over the years. So-called "literary" values have become increasingly important to SF writers, and consequently the scale of many stories has contracted a bit; the relative importance of "new" or big ideas has shrunk, and writers concentrate on *how* they deal with ideas more than coming up with new ones. (Just look at some recent big anthologies, *Full Spectrum 4* or Gardner Dozois's latest *Year's Best Science Fiction* volume — there are lots of good and even excellent stories out there, but hardly a one which stands out for its "originality" of concept. Even Arthur C. Clarke, whose career dates back nearly to Edenic times, dredges up a venerable idea for his *Year's Best* story, "The Hammer of God.")

On the other hand, such changes have not expunged the wonder from SF, even for long-time readers such as myself. Many writers continue to

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serve up a healthy portion of wondrousness while respecting the more "literary" values as well.

Perhaps the premier example is Gene Wolfe, whose *Book of the New Sun* stands as one of the finest literary achievements of the field, and also as a monument to the continuing ability of contemporary SF to evoke that much-eulogized sense of wonder. Wolfe stirs our awe from many angles: the wonder of scale (the towering Wall of Nessus, so high few birds can fly over it), of deep time (an Urth so ancient there are beaches of the powdered glass of dead cities), of simple strangeness (the deadly alien salamander, or the books of Ultan's library graffitoed with the scribblings of rats), and of synchronicity (when we realize that the woman Severian pulled from the lake of the dead is in fact a grandmother he never knew). It's hard to imagine any SF reader so jaded as to emerge from *The Claw of the Conciliator* without having felt his wonder-strings plucked.

In his latest epic-in-progress, *The Book of the Long Sun* (of which *Lake of the Long Sun* is the second and most recent volume), Wolfe once again sets to stoking our wonder-fires with an odd blend of antiquity and futurity. The action takes place aboard a tremendous interstellar colony ship, called by its inhabitants the Whorl, lit by a long fiery "sun" running down the center of the ship's cylindrical body. The Whorl is so huge and has been traveling for so long that few if any recall its original function or nature, treating it for all intents and purposes as the entire universe. The story focuses on Silk, a young priest ("Patera") in charge of a poor temple ("manteion") in the city of Viron. Silk's manteion has been sold for back taxes to a crime boss named Blood, and it's up to Silk to find a way to save it. But behind this simple foreground story looms a much larger and more momentous one, which promises to involve not only Silk and the political powers of the Whorl's various cities, but the various gods of the Whorl as well.

These gods are one of the most interesting elements of the series. With them, Wolfe constructs a scenario in which the religion of the Whorl is literally true, in one sense, while from a larger perspective it's patently false. A pantheon of personality constructs "live" in the onboard computer ("Mainframe") and form the heart of the Whorl's cult. People worship them with sacrifices, and they appear occasionally in temple "windows" (display screens) like ancient oracles or conjured spirits. If it sounds a little trite in summary, never fear; Wolfe's precise, subtle hand

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makes it tantalizing and colorful.

The Book of the New Sun drew some of its wondrousness from the mythic pattern of its story, and Wolfe builds up a similar structure here. The Whorl clearly was meant to make planetfall somewhere, and it's long overdue (we don't yet learn why), so the brewing struggle will likely involve getting it back on track — that is, literally changing the course of the world. Wolfe also drops hints of Silk's past which echo the origin-stories of other Redeemer figures such as Christ or Arthur, so there's not much doubt that future Long Sun volumes will continue to trace a mythic plot.

But the sense of awe that permeates *Lake of the Long Sun* and its predecessor, *Nightside the Long Sun*, stems from something more than the mythic pattern of Silk's story. It's the affectless description of the sun as a long, thin line overhead, or the "skylands" that are illuminated overhead by night, or the potent azoth with its projected "blade of universal discontinuity," that most awakens our sense of wonder. What's familiar to Silk is alien to us — and this works in reverse as well. Silk's growing comprehension of the world he lives in as a ship surrounded by space, his gods as computer constructs based on personalities as human as his own, and so on, fills us with sympathetic wonder as well. When Silk catches a glimpse of the void outside the ship, and suddenly comprehends (though dimly) that the distant lights must themselves be other worlds, "infinitely remote," we're in perfect empathy, perhaps recalling the moment when we ourselves first realized that each of those stars might be another sun, with other planets, and on those planets other people.

The Book of the Long Sun is Wolfe at his finest since *The Book of the New Sun*. His prose, always easily readable and yet elegant and stylish, achieves moments of intense beauty: Silk thinks about something "so often that it was like a water-smoothed stone, polished and opaque"; the night air hangs "still and dry and hot, like one driven by fever to the border of death."

Many SF writers mine history for the details of their future worlds, but Wolfe isn't satisfied with one or two sources. The Whorl smacks at times of Latin America, classical Greece and Rome, early medieval Europe, and (oddly) Victorian England (the speech of the lower classes is spiced with slang like something out of Partridge). It's a world at once utterly unfamiliar and yet so smoothly integrated it seems it could almost be real.

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Of course, the vast colony ship is no new idea. And the plot of *The Book of the Long Sun* bears several significant resemblances to that of *The Book of the New Sun*. And Silk shares some key traits with Severian. But it doesn't make any difference. *Lake of the Long Sun* demonstrates that it isn't in any sort of spurious originality that the pleasures of the genre are to be had. With this new series, Wolfe teaches a tired old SF reader how to marvel at the stars again.

There have been an awful lot of Mars novels lately, and many of them (naturally, it seems) end up focusing on the question of Mars's relationship with Earth. Being written mainly by Americans, the answer is usually: Rebel, and fight for independence.

This is the issue at the heart of Greg Bear's *Moving Mars*, and he arrives at the same result, but the path he takes in getting there makes all the difference. *Moving Mars* is the story of Casseia Majumdar (Bear lightly plays the conceit that this is an edition of her memoirs), daughter of the Majumdar Binding Multiple of Mars, and her rise from lukewarm student rebel to President of the Federal Republic of Mars during its crucial and nearly disastrous conflict with Mother Earth. (A Binding Multiple is a sort of corporate family, an extended family not limited to blood relationship, with a strong political and financial role in society.)

Casseia's story begins during a campus uprising. Tensions had been heating up between the Statists, who favor the establishment of a firm central Martian government, and the Gobacks, who want to keep the system of independent BM rule mediated by a joint Council of Binding Multiples. As part of the political maneuvering, the Statists have arranged for all non-Statist students and faculty at the University of Mars-Sinai to be "voided" — kicked out — but some 90 students (including a semi-reluctant Casseia) venture into the old construction tunnels around the university complex, rather than going meekly home. From there they stage a dramatic protest, marching across the surface to the university to demand reinstatement. Predictably, the protest turns a bit violent, and might have gotten much worse if the Statists hadn't been rapidly discredited by other factors and sent packing.

During the protest, Casseia meets Charles Franklin, a nerdy science type whom she eventually falls for, after much resistance. But, confused and put off by his clumsiness, she refuses his offer of lawbond (mar-

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riage) and sends him away. She develops an interest in Earth, and gets herself attached to a Martian embassy heading to the mother planet. Things don't go well, particularly when it seems the Earth's governments are only interested in manipulating Mars for their own ends, and when the ambassador, Casseia's uncle, commits an embarrassing social gaffe and must return to Mars in disgrace.

Back on Mars, older now and more confident, Casseia marries. The leader of her husband's BM, Ti Sandra, has ambitions to unite Mars in a federation, and she wants Casseia as her Vice President. Their campaign succeeds, but they're immediately confronted by a challenge from disaffected BMs allied with Earth. Meanwhile, Charles returns to the foreground when he approaches Casseia with an incredible opportunity — he and his team of scientists have discovered a way to manipulate the "descriptors" that underlie all matter and energy (that, in a sense, *are* all matter and energy) and thus change the mass, charge, spin, location in space and time, etc., of particles at will. It's an amazing amount of power, and it proves decisive in the struggle with Earth, first as a potential threat, and then, as Earth scientists begin to figure out the technique themselves, as the ultimate escape plan — moving Mars, the entire planet, to another star system altogether.

It's an audacious idea, and the descriptor theory is interesting enough to make it sound almost plausible — Bear is nothing if not concerned to keep his science pretty straight. It's one of the elements that gives *Moving Mars* a tangible air of wonder. This sort of near-magical instantaneous transport device is not entirely a surprise to anyone who tries to keep up with ideas in physics, or even with current SF — similar concepts based on an information theory of the cosmos showed up in Orson Scott Card's *Xenocide* and Ian Watson's *The Flies of Memory*, to name a couple — but Bear gives his up-up-and-away gimmick a much more credible scientific grounding than any other version to date. Reading his account, you can almost see how it could work, almost think it must be just around the corner; someone's got to be working on that, you think, why haven't they developed it yet?

In this way at least, the sense of wonder in *Moving Mars* is like that of Wolfe's Long Sun series: it's the wonder of the scientific process, of comprehending the workings of the cosmos. Silk's discoveries are, after all, scientific ones — he's learning deeper

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and deeper truths about the world he knows, just as Charles Franklin and his team of self-styled "Olympians" are doing in their experiments. Bear's cosmic descriptors are to us like Silk's glimpse of the stars, a peek into the fundamental truths that underlie the visible everyday world (or Whorl).

But *Moving Mars* is about a lot more than the science fiction gimmick that drives the final third of the plot. The bulk of the book dwells on Casseia's personal development and experiences, many of which don't bear directly (if at all) on her career in politics. Much of the detail of her trip to Earth, for example, means nothing in terms of later events, but it does give us a greater understanding of Casseia and a stirring glimpse of the future Earth: a New York of 50 million people, the buildings regrown by "architectural nano," the air filled with "infestations of learning" — viral programs carrying knowledge rather than disease. Bear's *Queen of Angels* (to which *Moving Mars* is loosely connected) provided a more vivid portrait of future human culture, but even this brief sideline visit has more to offer than many bland SF futures.

Which brings me to one of the odd things I've noticed about recent Mars novels. They don't seem capable of evoking that raw sense of alienness anymore, at least not simply by descriptions of the Martian landscape and life under domes or in tunnels. It surprised me how little the first section of *Moving Mars* felt like SF at all — Casseia's student days and young adult life were so finely drawn, so excellently and realistically portrayed, that I had to keep reminding myself that this was happening on *another planet*. Even Robinson's *Red* and *Green Mars*, so rich in description that he seems to know more about Mars than the *Viking* landers themselves, make Mars seem so real and so close that it's no more alien than Antarctica or the jungles of Borneo.

Perhaps this is what prevented most writers from setting stories on the red planet for a decade after the *Viking* landings: we now knew too much; we could do too good a job of envisioning the actual Mars, so the mystery had evaporated. We could no longer imagine Barsoom there, and suddenly it was rather mundane. (Perhaps this is also why nearly every recent Mars novel, whether it matters to the rest of the plot or not, stretches to include a scene of the possible discovery of life on Mars. *Viking* reduced the hope of finding life there to a wisp, but so brief a visit couldn't come close to extinguishing all our hopes. Now, on every fic-

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tional mission to Mars, we're eager to find some glimmer of alienness that will restore Mars's otherworldliness.)

But I don't wish to suggest that *Moving Mars* or any of the other recent Mars books are the lesser for this peculiar shift in sensibility. On the contrary, Bear's mimetic achievements in the earlier parts of *Moving Mars* serve to highlight later moments of authentic science-fictional thrills. It's as if he's pulling the magic rabbit of wonder out of the drab black top-hat of realistic fiction, showing us that the two need not persist in their mutual disdain. During Casseia's visit to Earth, Bear presents our own world (well, a future version of our own world) from the viewpoint of a stranger, and we see how wonderful and strange it can be. Casseia is stunned by open air, rain, trees standing outside stretching up toward an unimpeded sun. As their guide says, somewhat condescendingly, "'Martians...make us appreciate what we who live here take for granted.'"

Moving Mars displays Bear's finest talents, blending careful characterization with a rigorously imagined vision of the future and the most convincing portrayal of the political process I've ever seen in SF. And it's another demonstration that literary technique and the sense of wonder need not be opposed.

In his fifth novel (or novella — it's right on the word-count border), *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone*, Ian McDonald conjures a sense of wonder out of familiar territory even closer to home than Bear's next-planet-over. McDonald's 21st-century Japan owes a great deal to the cyberpunk visions of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and crowd: culture has become increasingly digital, the dead are commonly preserved in downloaded silicon copies, the West remains fascinated by the fading mystery of the East, while the East continues to ingest Western culture fodder in heaping quantities. Superpowerful megacorps dominate the economic and political scenes, and espionage and covert violence characterize international relations. Where McDonald's vision varies a bit is in its pastoral (rather than urban) feel. McDonald's Japan supports communities of cottage telecommuters living in small, eco-friendly townships, though of course there are hints of urban areas which, when glimpsed, suggest the Gibsonian Sprawl.

Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone introduces us to Ethan Ring, a character somewhat like other cyberpunk heroes in his *anomie*, but less hard-

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edged and nihilistic — rather than burnt out and affectless, Ring is plagued by guilt and self-recrimination over his deeds as an interrogator and assassin for the security arm of the pan-European government. We meet him first as a pilgrim, embarking on the traditional Shikoku pilgrimage (a meandering tour of the eighty-eight sacred sites of Shingon Buddhism) with his friend Masahiko, a noted *anime* artist. We learn about Ring's past through flashbacks as he and Masahiko pedal their mountain bikes along the pilgrim's route.

Ring was one of a group of graphic arts students who hit on an intriguing and ultimately dangerous idea — using a computer to blend thousands of images, they generated a set of "fracters," superpowerful glyphs which capture the essence of various emotions or experiences, such as religious bliss, sexual hunger, confusion, pain, and stark terror; and they discovered they could use these Platonic evocations of raw feeling to affect the minds of those who viewed them, paralyzing them with ecstasy or agony, blinding them or stunning them with the power of a simple image.

It starts as an intellectual game, but when two of Ring's fellow students die from exposure to the fracters, the rest realize how perilous their creations are, and try to cover their discovery up. But before Ring destroys their work, security agents of the European common government seize it and him, coercing him into using the fracters in their employ.

The fracters are a jolt of wonder in themselves, symbols of such power they're like a literalization of a semiotic fantasy. There's a visceral SF kick in watching Ring heal a young girl with the images, help Masahiko deal with his painful past by applying the fracters La Serenissima (blissful calm) and Mneme (memory) as they speak, and battle a pack of robodogs with the Keter fracter ("the Void, Annihilation") that's tattooed on his left palm. McDonald plays up the mythic qualities of the fracters, drawing their names from the Kabbalah and other sources, and the feelings they evoke are awesome: Binah, which freezes its beholder's time sense; Gevurah, "the destroying fear of God"; Tiferet, "healing and wholeness." The unstoppable force of Ring's images makes us think about the subtler (but perhaps no less powerful) influence of images in our own world. Are we, like Ring, more slaves of our images than masters?

Like Wolfe and Bear, McDonald doesn't skimp on other literary matters while reveling in the pure sci-

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ence-fictional thrill of his fracters. His setting may not be anything so special, but his portrayal of Ring, with all his guilt and yearning for absolution, and in particular Ring's relationship with one of the other students, Luka, is exceptionally skillful. Luka's path intersects Ring's several times over the years, as she develops into a successful artist and Ring pursues his dreadful work in espionage. She acts as an anchor, reminding Ring of himself as he was before he was forced into becoming an assassin, preventing him from drifting too far into the nightmare world he now inhabits. Their exchanges are lively and unpredictable, full of the feeling of real life, and their interaction plays an important part in making Ring's struggles matter to us. He's not just some irredeemable power-junkie now looking for pity; he remains a sympathetic victim, and we can cheer for him on his redemptive journey.

In the end, it's the grace of McDonald's writing and the sensitivity of his characterization that redeem *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone*'s comic-book showdown climax and make the fracters something more than a superhero's gimmick. They wouldn't have been nearly so interesting had the characters been flatter or the prose clunkier. With McDonald, Wolfe, and Bear to provide such examples, perhaps we can finally abandon the myth of the genre's fall from pulp-mag grace, give up the assumption that the sense of wonder and other literary values are mutually exclusive, and recognize that poetic prose, complex characterization, evocative imagery, symbolism, and all the other fictive tools dear to nongenre writers can enhance *any* story, even one which sets out to wallow unabashedly in the sorts of thrills which only science fiction can deliver.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Gathering, by Isobelle Carmody, Puffin Books, 1993; 266pp; Aust.$11.95, Trade paperback.

I'M WOEFULLY uninformed when it comes to the literary scene Down Under. Asked to come up with authors I've read from Australia/New Zealand, I can list Keri Hulme, Margaret Mahy, Peter Carey, Donna Williams and — I believe — Keith Taylor, and then I've already run out of names. Which was why I was so delighted when this novel by Isobelle Carmody showed up in my post office box.

What difference does it make where an author's from? None, one should think. Shouldn't the book stand or fall on its own merits? Well, of course. But how one was brought up and the place where one lives has an influence on one's work, conscious or not, and the voice one finds in an Australian writer is going to be different from a writer who makes his or her home in Great Britain, Canada or the States.

It's not simply a matter of flavor, but rather a whole sensibility and resonance that lies underneath the actual prose, hiding between the lines. Someone living in New York City is going to have a different take on the world from someone living on the West Coast, on the Canadian prairies, in Dublin, or near Apollo Bay, Victoria, which is where Carmody currently makes her home. Or at least they should. It's part of what sets one writer's individual style apart from another's.

It makes no difference where the book is actually set — Sidney, L.A., some mock-medieval secondary world, or Mars. Nor that the author might be trying to get under the skin of another culture and so is making a deliberate effort to erase his or her own cultural voice. Our pasts fill us up and are there, looking over our shoulder, no matter what we happen to be regarding. In the case of writers, the past makes its presence felt in

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many ways — sometimes if only in what the writer chooses to look at and how they present it. Which is how it should be, or the literary field would be more filled with clones than it already is.

But I digress. Returning to the book in hand and my delight in receiving it, I'm happy to report that it also met my expectations.

The Gathering is a YA novel, but like the best YA authors, Carmody doesn't write down to her audience. She probably, like Diana Wynne Jones and Patricia McKillip before her, simply writes her stories and it's the publishers who decide where the books will be slotted in the marketplace. So while her cast is young, and many of their concerns are certainly teenage concerns, there's a story here that readers of any age can appreciate and I don't doubt that after a few chapters it'll be irrelevant to you how old the characters are, you'll be so caught up in what's happening to them.

It's a little unfair to describe the surface plot, a confrontation between light and dark that seems to center around a haunted high school library building situated in Cheshunt, a model neighborhood with a checkered past which the residents seem determined to ignore. To focus solely on that would make the book seem far less original that it really is.

Better to talk about the young protagonist Nathanial Delaney, the new kid in school who finds himself quickly siding with a handful of other outsiders against the Orwellian excesses that have taken hold of the rest of their peers — as well as most of the adults and figures of authority in Cheshunt. Nathanial's voice is a delight, at times mature, as would suit the child of a single parent who has been moved from town to town through his short life, at other times reflecting the confused adolescent that he still is. Through his first-person narrative we get to appreciate both the day-by-day travails of his new life as well as his induction into another world that lies on top of ours, a world of ghosts and curses, the ordinary made extraordinary.

And yes there is an Australian flavor to the proceedings that, for us non-natives, adds yet another thin layer of exoticness to an already heady mix.

I mentioned above how the past is always with us, looking out on the world with us. And so it is with Nathanial and his friends in *The Gathering*, as well. They must each confront and deal with their pasts, with what first made them outsiders, before they can hope to solve the problems of the present day. How

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Carmody handles each of those painful situations is what gives the book its real wisdom and strength, and is why I recommend it to you.

Metal Angel, by Nancy Springer, ROC, 1994; 320pp; $4.99, Paperback.
Larque on the Wing, by Nancy Springer, AvoNova/Morrow, 1994; 277pp; $20.00, Hardcover.

I can remember when it was possible to keep up with all the fantasy and sf releases that came out in a year, a situation that's impossible now — and hardly affordable, even if one did have the necessary time. There are now so many authors, so many books being published, that even writers we enjoy can get lost in the shuffle.

I started reading Nancy Springer with *The Book of Suns* (1977), but somehow lost touch with what she's been doing over the past few years. So the arrival of these two recent releases seemed the perfect opportunity for me to touch base with her work once more. I'm glad I did. Springer appears to have been exploring some fascinating new ground since I last read her.

Metal Angel is sort of a cross between the Second Coming and those old Elvis movies, and I mean that in a positive sense. Volos, a lesser angel, rebels from what he perceives as the suffocating climate of heaven and reinvents himself on earth as a tall, long-haired and handsome, heavy-metal rock star. The trouble is, he forgot to get rid of the wings, six-foot-long appendages that end up bringing him as much grief as fame.

Springer does a wonderful job of showing us how Volos loses his innocence and learns to fit into the harsh reality of our world. More fascinating is her supporting cast — Texas, an ex-cop suffering a mid-life crisis, and Angela, who escapes a religious atmosphere as stifling as the one Volos fled. Their stories are the real meat of the book: how they and the rest of the cast react to Volos, what they want from him and what they will go through to get it.

The prose is a little flat at times, but there are many terrific scenes and Springer offers no facile answers to her characters' problems. There's a solid, page-turning story here, but also convincing insights into systems of belief, the responsibilities we owe to ourselves, those around us and to society, and an exploration of how the family of choice can be as important as the family one is born into.

Larque on the Wing touches on the above as well, but is mostly about identity as seen through the eyes of Larque, a middle-aged artist named

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Skylark by her parents, who is trying to deal with a mid-life crisis. That's tough enough on its own, but Larque's take on it comes with all sorts of other complications.

To start with, she has an ability she calls doppelgängering which allows her to inadvertently create a ghost-like doppelgänger of some aspect of a person or an object. Since she doesn't have much control over the ability, by now her family (husband Hoot and her three boys) have gotten used to having these mute aspects of themselves floating about the house. Happily the doppelgängers usually fade away after awhile — until Larque creates a doppelgänger of herself as she was at ten years old.

This one can talk. She introduces herself as Sky and proceeds to take Larque's life apart. She destroys Larque's art and studio, plays on her self-esteem and guilt, and finally shows Larque the way to Popular Street, a gay part of town that doesn't quite lie in the world we know — it's more like a half-step away. There Larque meets a mysterious gay cowboy named Shadow who transforms her so that while physically Larque is now Lark, a young man, inside she remains unchanged.

But it's even more complicated than that. Larque's mother Florrie has an ability as well: blinking. If she doesn't like something, she merely blinks it — either out of existence or into something more suitable. When she meets Lark, she blinks him away — creating a doppelgänger of her own, the Virtuous Woman, who immediately embarks on a crusade against the inhabitants of Popular Street. But Lark still exists, somewhat diminished because a part of him was taken away to make the Virtuous Woman.

It's to Springer's credit that all of this is not only kept clear, but also plausible — within the context of the novel, of course. How she resolves the Lark/Larque/Sky/Virtuous Woman problem says a great deal about how we perceive each other and the roles we're forced to play by the "rules" of society. She also does a fine job of balancing the serious issues at the heart of her story with the more bizarre elements — such as the party the Virtuous Woman throws for Florrie to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of her becoming a born-again virgin.

If I had any carp to pick with the book it would be that, after the story resolves, Springer tacks on a few pages of a new storyline that appears to be merely a set-up for a sequel. The book doesn't need a sequel — even though the marketplace so often says otherwise. I could be wrong, but if a sequel isn't planned, then those ex-

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traneous pages are disappointing for how they make the book fizzle to its end with an unresolved anti-climax. Still, that's a small carp for this madcap novel that does such a fine job of pulling off a highwire act between serious concerns and slapstick, and all the shades of story in between. And it could have been worse. Springer could have not written the book, thereby depriving us of all the wonderful elements that make *Larque on the Wing* work so well.

The Dark Domain, by Stefan Grabinski (translated by Miroslaw Lipinski), Dedalus/Hippocrene, 1994; 153pp; $10.95, Trade paperback.

Just as I was getting ready to mail in the current column, this short story collection by Polish author Stefan Grabinski arrived in my P.O. box. Apropos to what we were discussing above in the review of Isobelle Carmody's book, I felt it was worth making a brief mention of *The Dark Domain* in the same column, seeing how the author is writing not only from another culture, but another time as well.

Grabinski (1887-1936) specialized in strange and unsettling stories that he called "psychofantasies," dark explorations of human behavior that range from the macabre to the surreal. The sense of time and place is evocatively rendered, while losing none of its relevance to a contemporary audience, and Grabinski's prose will appeal to those who admire the work of Poe, Aickman and Clark Ashton Smith. For those of you who are already Grabinski enthusiasts, I should mention that this collection contains two previously unpublished stories.

Since your local bookstore probably won't be carrying this, you can write for ordering information to: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 171 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016-1002.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 8480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Ray Bradbury's fiction has been a staple of this magazine since the Winter/Spring 1950 issue. He has written hundreds of short stories, a number of screenplays, and some classic novels, including Fahrenheit 451 *and* The Martian Chronicles. *We are pleased that he has again returned to these pages.*

"From the Dust Returned" contains a link to another wonderful Bradbury novel, Something Wicked This Way Comes.

From the Dust Returned

By Ray Bradbury

LONG BEFORE THE DUST Witch who traveled with Dark's Pandemonium Shows, there was another.

Born into death more than two thousand years earlier — three hundred years before the Crown of Thorns, the Gethsemane Garden, and the empty Tomb.

By born into death I mean the original skin-and-bones of Nef, grandmother to Nefertiti. Beautiful long before the birth into life of the handsome princess whose one-eyed bust resides in world museums, purchasable for a few dollars plus thirty pounds of synthetic marble.

This Dust Witch, this royal mummy, drifted on a dark boat past the empty Mount of the Sermon, scraped over the Rock at Plymouth and land-sailed to Little Fort in upper Illinois, surviving Grant's twilight assaults and Lee's pale dawn retreats.

One family owned their ancestor, this particular Egyptian mummy, this great times twenty-two greats Grandma. They shipped her over land in a thin stone sarcophagus from which she was evicted when the tomb was

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needed for family baths.

Stashed from room to room, this small hemp-rope tobacco-leaf-brown ancestral relic was lifted, light as balsa wood, to the upper attics where she was covered, smothered, then ignored by a family, eager for survival and forgetful of unremembered deaths' leftovers. Abandoned to attic silence and the drift of golden pollens on the air, sucking in darkness as sustenance, breathing out only quiet and serenity, this ancient visitor waited for someone to pull aside the accumulated love letters, toys, melted candles and candelabra, tattered skirts, corsets, and headlined papers from wars won-then-lost in instantly neglectful Pasts.

The day for her rebirth came one hundred years after the shot that killed Lincoln and stilled history.

Nef from the mysterious Isle arose into the light because someone had come and leafed through, dug and tossed aside until just her head, her face, her sewn-shut eyes were framed in autumn book leaves, legal tracts and jackstraw mouse-bones.

And it was Timothy Light, son of Jonathan and Priscilla Dark, who found and stared down upon her.

"Who are you?" he cried, as if an answer were expected. "Why are you here?" he asked.

And reply the old lost woman did.

"I," she whispered.

Timothy stiffened.

"Am," murmured the dust in the old woman's lips.

"What!?" Timothy bent so the dust touched his ear.

"Nef," came the filtering, blowing whisper behind the sewn-shut eyes and the dry riverbed mouth.

"Nef!?" Timothy had heard the name, remembered the name from ten years before when he was three.

"Your," whispered the crumbs of sand falling from the edges of her mouth, "long," she murmured, "lost," she whispered, "an...ces...tor."

"Can't be!"

"Issssss..." said the faint crack beginning to appear in the bas-relief mouth.

"No!"

"Not...so...loud..." whispered her voice, a ventriloquist's thrown-syl-

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lables from two thousand years of quiet echoes. "You...will...shatter...me."

And indeed platelets of dry sand fell from her bandaged shoulders, hieroglyphs tattered on her breastplate.

"How did you get here?" said Timothy at last.

"Rather," she said, "ask who...called *you*...here?"

"Who?!" he shouted.

"...softly..." she said.

"Who?" he said softly.

"I," said the Dust Witch.

"Nobody called."

"And yet you heard." The old woman spoke more clearly now, with many syllables and many words.

"Look..."

A tiny spiral of dust brushed along her ciphered bosom where gods of life and death posed as stiffly as tall rows of ancient corn and wheat.

Timothy's eyes grew wide.

"Well?" whispered her voice.

"That." He touched the face of a child sprung up in a field of holy beasts. "Me?"

"Indeed."

"Then it wasn't just *me* searching? I was *meant* to find you? Why?"

"Be...cause...it...is...the...end." The slow words fell like golden crumbs from her lips.

A rabbit thumped and ran in Timothy's chest.

"End of *what?*"

One of the sewn eyelids of the ancient woman gave the merest crack open to show a crystal gleam tucked within. Timothy glanced up at the attic beams where that gleam touched its light.

"This?" he said. "Our place?"

"...yesssss..." came the whisper. She sewed one eyelid back up, but opened the other with light. "...everyone in it...meaning — "

Her fingers, trembling across the pictographs on her bosom, touched like a spider here, then there as she whispered:

"This..."

Timothy responded. "Uncle Einar!"

"He who has wings?"

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"I've *flown* with him."

"Fortunate child. And *this*?"

"My sister. Cecy!"

"She also flies?"

"With no wings. She sends her mind out — "

"Like ghosts?"

"Which enters people's ears to look out their eyes!"

"Fortunate girl. And this?" The spider fingers trembled.

There was no symbol where she pointed.

"Ah." Timothy laughed. "My cousin, Ran. Invisible. Doesn't *need* to fly. Can go anywhere and no one knows."

"Fortunate man. And this and this and yet again *this*?"

Her dry finger moved and scratched.

And Timothy named all of the uncles and aunts and cousins and nieces and nephews who had lived in this house forever, or a hundred years, give or take bad weather, storms, or war. There were thirty rooms and each more filled with cobweb and nightbloom and sneezes of ectoplasms that posed in mirror to be blown away when deaths' head moths or funeral dragonflies sewed the air and flung the shutters wide to let the dark spill in.

Timothy named each hieroglyphic face and the ancient woman gave the merest nod of her dusty head as her fingers lay on a final hieroglyph.

"Do I touch the maelstrom of darkness?" she asked.

"This house, yes."

And it was so. There lay this very house, embossed with lapis lazuli and trimmed with amber and gold, as it must have been when Lincoln went unheard at Gettysburg.

And as he gazed, the bright embossments began to shiver and flake. An earthquake shook the frames and blinded the golden windows.

"Tonight," mourned the dust, turned in on itself.

"But," cried Timothy, "after so long. Years. Why *now*?"

"It is the age of discovery and revelations. The pictures that fly through the air. The sounds that blow in the winds. Things seen by many. Things heard by all. Travelers on the road by the tens of millions. No escape. We have been found by the words in the air and the pictures sent on light beams into rooms where children and children's parents sit while Medusa, with insect antennae coifs, tells all and seeks punishment."

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"For what?"

"No reason is needed. It is just the revelation of the hour, the meaningless alarms and excursions of the week, the panic of the single night, no one asks, but death and destruction are delivered, as the children sit with their parents behind them, frozen in an Arctic spell of unwanted gossip and unneeded slander. No matter. The dumb will speak, the stupid will assume, and we are destroyed.

"Destroyed..." she echoed.

And the house on her bosom and the house beams above the boy shook, waiting for more quakes.

"The floods will soon arrive...inundations. Tidal waters of men..."

"What have we done?"

"Nothing. We have survived all. And those that come to drown us are envious of our lives for so many centuries. Because we are different, we must be washed away. Hist!"

And again her hieroglyphs shook and the attic sighed and creaked like a ship in a rising sea.

"What can we do?" Timothy asked.

"Escape to all directions. They cannot follow so many flights. The house must be vacant by midnight when they come with torches."

"Torches?"

"Isn't it always fire and torches, torches and fire?"

"Yes." Timothy felt his tongue move, stunned with remembrance. "I have seen films. Poor running people, people running after. And torches and fire."

"Well then. Call your sister. Cecy must warn all the rest."

"This I have done!" cried a voice from nowhere.

"Cecy!?"

"She is with us," husked the old woman.

"Yes! I've heard it all," said the voice from the beams, the window, the closets, the downward stairs. "I am in every room, in every thought, in every head. The bureaus are being ransacked and the luggage packed. Long before midnight, the house will be empty."

A bird unseen brushed Timothy's eyelids and ears and settled behind his gaze to blink out at Nef.

"Indeed, the Beautiful One is here," said Cecy, using Timothy's

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throat and mouth.

"Nonsense! Would you hear another reason why the weather will change and the floods will come?"

"Indeed." Timothy felt the soft presence of his sister press against his windowed eyes, eager for response. "Tell us, Nef."

"They hate me because I am the accumulation of the knowledge of death. That knowledge is a burden to them instead of a proper responsibility."

"Can," started Timothy, and Cecy finished, "can death be remembered?"

"Oh, yes. But only by the dead. You the living are blind. But we who have bathed in Time, and been reborn as children of the earth and inheritors of Eternity, drift gently in rivers of sand and streams of darkness, knowing the bombardment from the stars whose emanations have taken millions of years to rain upon the land and seek us out in our plantations of eternally wrapped souls like great seeds beneath the marbled layers and the bas-relief skeletons of reptile birds that fly on sandstone, with wingspreads a million years wide and as deep as a single breath. We are the keepers of Time. You who walk the earth, know only the moment, which is whisked away with your next exhalation. Because you move and live, you cannot keep. We are the granaries of dark remembrance. Our funerary jars keep not only our lights and silent hearts, but our wells, deeper than you can imagine, where the subterrane of lost hours, all the deaths that ever were, the deaths on which mankind has built new tenements of flesh and ramparts of stone moving ever upward even as we sink down and down, doused in twilights, bandaged by midnights. We accumulate. We are wise with farewells. Would you not admit, child, that forty billion deaths are a great wisdom, and those forty billion who shelf under the earth are a great gift to the living so that they might live?"

"I guess."

"Do not guess, child. *Know.* I will teach, and that knowledge, important to living because only death can set the world free to be born again. That is your sweet burden. And tonight is the night when your task begins. *Now*!"

At which moment, the bright medal in the center of her golden breast flared. The light blazed up to swarm the ceiling like a thousand summer bees threatening, by their very flight and friction, to fire the dry beams. The attic seemed to spin with the rush-around light and heat. Every slat, shingle,

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crossbeam groaned and expanded, while Timothy raised his arms and hands to ward off the swarms, staring at the kindled bosom of Nef.

"Fire!" he cried, "torches!"

"Yes," hissed the old, old woman. "Torches and fire. Nothing stays. All burns."

And with this, the architecture of the long-before Gettysburg Appomattox house smoked on her breastplate.

"Nothing stays!" cried Cecy, everywhere at once, like the fireflies and summer bees bumping to char the beams. "All goes!"

And Timothy blinked and bent to watch the winged man and the sleeping girl (Cecy) and the Unseen Uncle, invisible save for his passing like the wind through clouds or snowstorms, or wolves running in fields of black wheat, or bats in wounded zigzag flights devouring the moon, and a double dozen of other aunts and uncles and cousins striding the road away from town. Or soaring, to lodge in trees a mile off and safe, as the mob, the torchlit madness, flowed up old Nef-Mum's chest, while off out the window you could see the real ones, the mob with torches heading like a flow of lava, on foot, bike, and car, a storm of cries choking their throats.

Even as Timothy felt the floorboards shift, like scales from which weights are dropped, with seventy times a hundred pounds in flight they jumped overboard from porches. The house skeleton, shaken free, grew tall as winds vacuumed the now empty rooms and flapped the ghost curtains and sucked the front door wide to welcome the torches and fire and the crazed mob in.

"All goes," cried Cecy, a final time.

And she abandoned their eyes and ears and bodies and minds and, restored to her body below, ran so lightly, quickly her feet left no tread in the grass.

"Now," said old Nef. "You be my savior, child. Lift and carry."

"Can't!" cried Timothy.

"I am dandelion seed and thistledown. Your breath will drift, your heartbeat sustain me. Now!"

And it was so. With one exhalation, a touch of his hands, the wrapped gift from long before Saviors and parted Red Seas arose on the air. And seeing he could carry this parcel of dream and bones, Timothy wept and ran.

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From a mile beyond the house, which was now a pyre letting sparks and plumes darken the sky to storm-cloud the moon, Timothy stopped under a tree where many of his cousins and perhaps Cecy caught their breath, even as a rickety jalopy braked and a farmer peered out at the distant blaze and the nearby child.

"What's that?" He pointed his nose at the burning house.

"Wish I knew," said Timothy.

"What you *carrying*, boy?"

The man scowled at the bindle under Timothy's elbow.

"Collect 'em," said Timothy. "Old newspapers. Comic strips. Old magazines. Headlines, heck, some before the Rough Riders. Some before Bull Run. Trash and junk." The bindle under his arm rustled in the night wind. "Great junk, swell trash."

"Just like me, once." The farmer laughed quietly. "No more."

And he drove away.

THERE WAS a tap at the door and Dwight William Alcott looked up from a display of photographs just sent on from some digs outside Karnak. He was feeling especially well fed, visually, or he would not have answered the tap. He nodded, which seemed signal enough, for the door opened immediately and a bald head moved in.

"I know this is curious," said his assistant, "but there is a child here..."

"That *is* curious," said D.W. Alcott. "Children do not usually come here. He has no appointment?"

"No, but he insists that after you see the gift he has for you, you'll make an appointment, *then*."

"An unusual way to make appointments," mused Alcott. "Should I see this child? A boy, is it?"

"A brilliant boy, so he tells me, bearing an ancient treasure."

"That's too much for me!" The curator laughed. "Let him in."

"I already am." Timothy, half inside the door, scuttled forward with a great rattling of stuffs under his arm.

"Sit down," said D.W. Alcott.

"If you don't mind, I'll stand. She might want two chairs, sir, however."

"*Two* chairs?"

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"If you don't mind, sir."

"Bring an extra chair, Smith."

"Yes, sir."

And two chairs were brought and Timothy lifted the long balsa-light gift and placed it on both chairs where the bundled stuffs shown in a good light.

"Now, young man — "

"Timothy," supplied the boy.

"Timothy, I'm busy. State your business, please."

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"Two thousand four hundred years and 900 million deaths, sir..."

"My God, that's quite a mouthful." D.W. Alcott waved at Smith. "Another chair." The chair was brought. "Now you really must sit down, son." Timothy sat. "Say that again."

"I'd rather not, sir. It sounds like a lie."

"And yet," said D.W. Alcott, slowly, "why do I believe you?"

"I have that kind of face, sir."

The curator of the museum leaned forward to study the pale and intense face of the boy.

"By God," he murmured, "you *do.*"

"And what have we here," he went on, nodding to what appeared to be a catafalque.

"It looks like a bunch of old papers," said the boy, unblinking and looking only at the museum gentleman. "But it's papyrus, sir."

"You know the *name* papyrus?"

"Everyone knows *that.*"

"Boys, I suppose. Having to do with robbed tombs and Tut. Boys know papyrus."

"Yes, sir. Come look, if you want."

The curator *wanted,* for he was already on his feet.

He arrived to look down and probe as through a filing cabinet, leaf by leaf of cured tobacco, it almost seemed, with here and there the head of a lion or the body of a hawk. Then his fingers riffled faster and faster and he gasped as if struck in the chest.

"Child," he said and let out another breath. "Where did you find these?"

"*This,* not these, sirs. And I didn't find it, it found *me.* Hide and seek in

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a way, it said. I heard. Then it wasn't hidden anymore."

"My God," gasped D.W. Alcott, using both hands now to open "wounds" of brittle stuff. "Does this belong to you?"

"It works both ways, sir. It owns me, I own it. We're family."

The curator glanced over at the boy's eyes. "Again," he said. "I *do* believe."

"Thank God."

"Why do you thank God?"

Because if you didn't believe me, I'd have to leave." The boy edged away.

"No, no," cried the curator. "No need. But why do you speak as if this, *it*, owned you, as if you are related?"

"Because," said Timothy. "It's Nef, sir."

"Nef?"

Timothy reached over and folded back a tissue of bandage.

From deep under the openings of papyrus, the sewn-shut eyes of the old old woman could be seen, with a hidden creek of vision between the lids. Dust filtered from her lips.

"Nef, sir," said the boy. "Mother of Nefertiti."

The curator wandered back to his chair and reached for a crystal decanter.

"Do you drink wine, boy?"

"Not until today, sir."

Timothy sat for a long moment, waiting, until Mr. D.W. Alcott handed him a small glass of wine. They drank together and at last Mr. D.W. Alcott said:

"Why have you brought this — it — her — here?"

"It's the only safe place in the world."

The curator nodded. "True. Are you offering," he paused. "Nef. For sale?"

"No, sir."

"What do you want, then?"

"Just that if she stays here, sir, that once a day, you talk to her." Embarrassed, Timothy looked at his shoes.

"Would you trust me to do that, Timothy?"

Timothy looked up. "Oh, yes, sir. If you *promised*."

Then he went on, raising his gaze to fix on the curator.

"More than that, *listen* to her."

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"She talks, does she?"

"A lot, sir."

"Is she talking, now?"

"Yes, but you have to bend close. I'm used to it, now. After a while, you will be, too."

The curator shut his eyes and listened. There was a rustle of ancient paper, somewhere, which wrinkled his face, listening. "What?" he asked. "What is it she, mainly, says?"

"Everything there is to say about death, sir."

"Everything?"

"Two thousand four hundred years, like I said, sir. And 900 million people who had to die so we can live."

"That's a lot of dying."

"Yes, sir. But I'm glad."

"What a terrible thing to say!"

"No, sir. Because if *they* were alive, we wouldn't be able to move. Or breathe."

"I see what you mean She knows all *that*, does she?"

"Yes, sir. Her daughter was the Beautiful One Who Was There. So *She* is the One Who Remembers."

"The Ghost that tells a flesh and soul complete history of the Book of the Dead?"

"I think so, sir.

"And one other thing," added Timothy.

"And?"

"If you don't mind, any time I want a Visitors Card."

"So you can come visit any time?"

"After hours, even."

"I think that can be arranged, son. There will be papers to be signed, of course, and authentication carried out." The boy nodded. The man rose.

"Silly of me to ask. Is she still talking?"

"Yes, sir. Come close. No, *closer.*"

The boy nudged the man's elbow, gently.

Far off near the temple of Karnak, the desert winds sighed. Far off, between the paws of a Great Lion, the dust settled.

"Listen," said Timothy.

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Jack Cady's first story for F&SF, *"The Night We Buried Road Dog" (January, 1993), just won the Nebula award for Best Novella. It is also a nominee for the Stoker award and for the Hugo award. His short story collection,* The Sons of Noah, *received a World Fantasy Award. "Road Dog" will be the title story in his next collection, to be published by Arkham House. In October, St. Martin's Press will publish Jack's novel,* Street.

"Our Ground and Every Fragrant Tree is Shaded" is a Victorian story with very modern sensibilities.

Our Ground and Every Fragrant Tree Is Shaded

By Jack Cady

ON MOST DAYS WE THOUGHT of him as reliable, if we troubled to think of him at all as we walked the streets of this small coastal town. Our northwest harbor lies mostly wrapped with rain. Wind swirls the hallmark-mist of Pacific beaches lying north of California. The reliable James would appear walking toward you from the mist, like a specter risen from distant waves and on its course toward the haunting of a maritime museum, or a moored ship, or to blow wraith-like above rain-filled and empty streets. There seemed always something moist about him. He gave the impression of being soaked, as though a sheen of water silvered the sidewalks on which he strode. He would only, in fact, be on his way to work at a general store where the main preoccupations dealt with groceries.

And groceries being what they are, and James being who he was — which is to say, reserved and distant — we townspeople could scarcely have realized how that moist man might herald eternal sorrow. We do not exactly blame the reliable James for our troubles; and we will certainly not blame ourselves,

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but blame looks for somewhere to alight. We can say that trouble centers around the store, and the center of that store expresses the 19th century. The store rises Victorian and fanciful and filled with whispering shadows.

Today the place seems only a fey notion from long ago, but in 1870 its customers delighted in cathedral stained-glass windows through which occasional northwest sun painted sacks of feed with roseate glow, or bluely and greenly illuminated racks of corn brooms, new harness, axes, flour barrels; the hodge-podge of items either useful or ornamental on which Victorian lives depended.

And, if there is a curse on this town — and if we are doomed in some peculiar way — (because we recognize that to be human is to be doomed, but not necessarily in ways peculiar) doom began when Able Andrewes came to these parts in the late 1860s. Guns of the Civil War stood stilled. Frontier spread before settlers. Tall ships swam in our harbor surrounded by a babel of languages: Italian, Chinese, Japanese, English, German, Norwegian, Swedish and French. Andrewes traced his ancestry to English gentry; thus acted as a very proper type of gentlemanly adventurer — a bearer of the white man's burden — and he existed comfortably among Oriental faces, Mediterranean faces, Blacks, Indians, Hawaiians, and Samoans.

His Trading Post, as he chose to style it, became the largest building north of San Francisco. It rose four stories, with peaked Victorian roof and fanciful gables. Although structurally a warehouse, ten cathedral windows offered the impression of a church. The trading post stood more certainly, and certainly more handsomely, than any of the town's several churches.

The main floor displayed foodstuffs in kegs, barrels, loaves, bundles, and boxes. Spices and teas perfumed the store, while gas lamps provided light. Stained glass windows portrayed frontier trades: Indians bartering skins of sea otter, Chinese working lime, and, in this town, master builders erecting Victorian mansions.

In the basement rested what was then a modern miracle, a pulley-operated elevator capable of lifting a ton. The elevator carried new wood-burning cookstoves, pumps, bollards, ship fittings, bull tongue plows, wrought iron railings to surround widows' walks; heavy merchandise: ships' anchors to carriage axles. Andrewes made claim that his Trading Post carried at least one of every item manufactured.

The second floor displayed hardware, rifles, steel traps for gathering

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pelts. The third carried furniture: Victorian love seats, armoires, beds with richly carved roses, dressers, commodes, pier mirrors, hatstands in walnut and oak. On the fourth floor Andrewes established living quarters.

There are still folk in this town who remember Andrewes as an old, old man greeting dawn above the eastern range of mountains. By then, any consequences of Andrewes' actions lived among us. None of us can say that he engaged in criminal acts, but all of us know that he lived comfortably among those who did. He financed ships that carried bond slaves as well as goods. He discounted large orders of merchandise to men who dealt in marginally legal business, or in business that was neither moral or legal. People who remember Andrewes picture him standing on his fourth floor balcony, and he is clothed in proper Victorian attire. His hands reach toward the mountains, beckoning in the dawn, or, as some grumblers complain, calling for morning light to dispel his self-inflicted darkness.

By then and honorably, he was long married, siring sons Edward and Charles. And, by then, he was more wraith than man. The fine English figure became diminutive over years. Late one night he visited his sons in their rooms, spoke to his sons kindly, then departed. His physician suggested that Andrewes wafted away on winds because he weighed less than his clothes. Andrewes disappeared in 1935.

His sons, Edward and Charles, continued to mind the store and these two would, through the years, come to depend on their reliable employee James.

This is a Victorian tale, Gentle Reader, and I am thus allowed to take you by the arm as we stroll past echoes of horror. Although I tell the tale as if "we," the people of the town are speaking, it's obvious a single person pens these words. I introduce myself as Baruch, a modern scribbler of records. During those times when I do not scribble, I make my living selling old books from a storefront on Ocean Street. Local opinion holds me as surly, aging, irascible, crusty — in short, a curmudgeon — and I foster the illusion.

But, Gentle Reader, since we are unlikely ever to meet, I need not be curmudgeonly with you. In fact, I beg your indulgence.

For a long time no one knew or cared where James spent his sleeping hours. If asked, we might suspicion that he never left the store. After all, did he not always range from cellar to fourth floor of that mammoth enterprise? Did he not continually move, nearly ghost-like, between bundles of fresh

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asparagus and cans of pie mix? The man and the store intermingled. Only recently did we townspeople begin to fear. Inquiry brought discovery. James walks as a symbol of fear more dreadful than any of us have, heretofore, owned the courage to imagine.

James, we now understand, steps nightly from his round of groceries, walks the short distance to the harbor; is then swallowed by the tides, only to be spit ashore half an hour before the store opens. James sleeps, or walks, or God-knows-what beneath those waves. He in no manner resembles the living dead, is not a zombie. Such creatures walk the realms of the fantastic. About that reliable employee James, there is nothing fantastic.

We turn now, you and I, to a burden weighing heavy in this tale. That burden is the entire Victorian period, and Victorian dreams that roil and churn and thrust from the past; the calamities and the curse.

They saw themselves, those olden Englishmen, as bearers of the lamp of progress. They, like Able Andrewes, set forth as missionaries to dark races, bringing Bibles and rifles and machines. They acted, sometimes unwisely, and did not understand the effects of their actions. Nations fell before them. In their grandest hours they bowed to the highest forms of duty, for "duty" intertwined them like strands of rope. The proper Victorian feared failure to his duty more than he feared dying.

They also spoke of purity, were sternly fascinated with sex, and romantically fascinated with death. They dreamed of progress as they fashioned the Industrial Revolution. It takes no scribbler of antiquities to note Victorian styles still alive within us. Are we not bound by duty, ofttimes obscene? Do we not bore the world with eternal tut-tuts and quacks concerning sex? Have we not turned technology into a hotly forged divinity? Are not most places close to them in spirit? Do we not now pilfer souls, whereas Victorians boldly stole them? Which brings us back to the reliable James.

Once the facts became known, our mayor, who administers the town after business hours, visited the store and asked James, "Whatever in the bird-brained world was he doing?"; which in this small town is the best we can manage in the way of diplomacy. James replied, but not distantly, that he "paid attention to his own business." He added that he was "minding the store."

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The store has changed little during the 20th century, and to the store I went on behest of the mayor, for I am the town historian. James stood beneath soft light through stained glass. Fresh cabbages lay boxed at his feet. He made check marks on a packing list. His employers worked elsewhere: Edward handling receipts and deposits, Charles, who in his age is still sprightly, attending the cash register. Fatigue lined James's face, but his erect posture denied tiredness that drove bone deep. Groceries encircled him. In the cellar, beneath our feet, ranged drill presses and parts for modern tractors. Above us the store held sofas and china; screws, turnbuckles, manila rope and fishing gear.

"The mayor is a proud though foolish man," I told James. "He is also vexed."

"The mayor runs a feed lot," James replied in a soft voice. "He fattens stock. Nothing foolish about it for as long as folks need beef." Always before, James carried a Victorian reserve. Now his voice held quiet compassion. Thin brown hair lay sideways across his skull in vague attempt to cloak a bald spot. Large hands with stubby nails carried callus from years of stocking merchandise. Brown eyes were guileless as a child's, though somehow moist. In any dry goods store he would be directed to ready-made shirts and pants marked "medium."

His reply slowed me for a moment. Although I'm in trade, I've never regarded my bookstore as a holy habitation. James spoke in Victorian terms. To him, the mayor's feed lot justified the mayor's ambitions. Victorians truly believed that commerce worked a missionary influence, and England was a great mercantile nation.

"Even were the mayor an angel," I replied, "you beg the question. You are presently the only subject of conversation. Our ladies suggest iniquities, our loafers make uncomfortable jokes, and our banker fears for business. You will soon be the subject of sermons."

"Business picked up last month." James folded invoices and looked across racks of foodstuff like a father regarding a favorite child.

"Because you are notorious."

"'Afflicted' is a better word. I could tell you more, but there's enough sorrow in the world, so I'll not add to it. Let us please allow 'afflicted' to be the last word." His was an anguished and weary spirit in a fatigued body, but only a sharp eye could uncover his distress. Victorians never blinked before

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a downturn in fortune. He lighted in me a spark of compassion.

"I am not as harsh as my reputation would have me," I told him. "It is not ungentlemanly to accept assistance."

It was he who viewed me with compassion, looking beyond me finally to our quiet streets. "There's enough trouble for everyone," he whispered. "I should say no more."

Momentary terror walked across my soul. I stood among cabbages burnished with light through stained glass windows. Only the banality of the store shone true, for all else seemed filled with threat. The terror passed. My mind changed from fear to hideous and alien knowledge that said I grow old in an alien country. I age in a shameless nation of strange language, which has no respect for old men.

"I do not understand," I told James in parting, "but fear that I will." I stepped from the store and into our streets.

Was James a modern Jonah — swallowed by the tides then belched ashore — and was not Jonah's sin the sin of Pride? I walked toward the harbor, walking by congeries of houses and huts. Victorian mansions glowered in company with rusting house trailers. A few split levels nested beside two storey frames; yet Victorian houses dominated. Before the turn of the century this town lay awash in wealth. Its fortunes saw decline when the first transcontinental railroad drove to tidewater at a different port. These great houses rose from trade; but trade not always luminous. Irish serving girls earned fifty cents a week, plus stingy room and board. Chinese bond slaves cooked lime and died in thousands. Indian and Malay prostitutes fell ravaged before sailors and disease. Fortunes flowered from that infamous poppy, opium.

I felt the press of antique darkness. Andrewes' spirit still touches here. Too many people died badly in these parts. Some townsfolk claim to hear spectral voices in the wind, or distant weeping at the beginning of each new day. Dirges moan beyond the cause of simple avarice. In the name of progress young boys died from shanghai to merchant ships. Indian children saw their parents lynched. When smugglers avoided apprehension by authorities, they bound illegal immigrants in chain and dropped them screaming overboard; while in these great houses sounded tinkling notes from harpsichords, sounded the assured voices of wealthy men, the lyrical voices of their ladies.

At the harbor water moved like restless spirits. We live precariously

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beside this sea. Darkness rises from all horizons, but it is dark waters that beckon us. Every year a boat or two is drowned. Many, many hulks of sailing ships, coal burning ships, and modern steamers moulder beneath these waters.

What must James see beneath the waves? Skeletons, no doubt, skeletons representing failed hopes. He must see fortunes in cargo, even cargo once destined for Andrewes' store. Perhaps he wanders beneath crystal chandeliers waving in water above dance floors of ships' salons. Our remaining piers stand above great darkness, and the pull of the sea draws that irrational part of our minds to self destruction.

"IT'S ABLE ANDREWES," Mamie Worthy told me when I encountered her at our Carnegie library. "You young ones have no notion of the weight of things." Mamie is as old as Edward and Charles, which is to say she is eighty; twenty years older than I. She takes her last name more seriously than she ought. In her case, duty asks inquiry into all of town life. She can trace the lineage of every cat and dog, can predict births occurring fewer than nine months after marriage, and knows when a preacher stumbles in prayer, and why. Mamie's is not the voice of mirth, the voice of gladness. At the same time she is honest.

"I do not like you," she told me, "but that's not news. The news is why I do not like you. You are a lonely man who protects himself with loneliness. The rest of the town just thinks you're a snot."

"Yet, I like you," I replied with all truthfulness. "With the length of your nose from prying I should not, but there it is. Able Andrewes disappeared three years after I was born and two years after James saw life. By then Edward was twenty, and Charles nineteen. How can Able Andrewes have aught to do with us?"

Brightness faded briefly from her eyes. Her black dress, clean pressed and ankle length, seemed more alive than she. Sadness overcame her face. "I do not give a holy hoot what people do," she told me. "If you think there's a contradiction I'll remind you that you are a grown man who digs at the past like a dog after small bones. You figure it out."

"I like you," I told her, "not because you offer pleasure or charm, but because until now you have always been honest."

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"You chose to remain in this town," she said in a voice a little larger than a whisper. "Why?"

"It has always been my home." My response was not sufficient, but I had never pondered the question.

"No dream took you away. Your answer will be found in the realm of Able Andrewes' dreams. I'll say no more." She turned from me. Her black skirts whispered like the tears of widowhood.

Victorian secrecy caused loneliness, and I returned to Victorian streets. Mamie is acute, though I resented her comments. I reminded myself that a man with books is never lonely. Because a man chooses not to marry, or sit at the local café and talk crops or business spells nothing. And, all men age in a strange land because styles change and youth is ignorant. The landscape of memory becomes more real than modern landscape.

Mamie seemed inhibited. I sought one who is not. Our town drunk in no manner resembles the humorous Irishman so beloved by storytellers. He is Swede Andersen, a tall and broad man in his day, who in other days fisted sail. Vessels with auxiliary sail coasted these shores into the 1930s.

"Mamie takes things personal," he told me, "but it isn't Able Andrewes, it's the store. Come to think of it, it's both." His diminished frame anchored the corner stool of our only tavern. Beyond windows, gray light walked the horizon. It wrapped around a fishing vessel swimming moderately heavy seas. Swede's hands swell large around a beer glass, his knuckles dislodged in old accidents and fights. The rest of him seems no more than a cameo.

"How inebriated are you?"

"As well as can be expected," he told me, "but suds don't make me talk. I'd tell you anyway." Eyes of thin blue, decorated with lines of red, watched the fishing vessel. "Damn fools," he said about the fishermen, but his voice was filled with longing for the sea. "This business of getting old sure makes a fella think."

"I have all afternoon," I told him, "and the will to listen."

"So James pokes around under the harbor, and it's a wonder most of us ain't with him for the stroll. We're part of the store. You think I drink for fun?" Swede watched a young couple with a small child as they passed along the boardwalk. "Kids figure the world got made an hour before they were born," Swede said about the couple. "James sure thought that way."

Swede's tale meandered, but gradually told of waste and sorrow. It

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centered on a daily round of innocuous tasks and perceptions. At eighteen James left for college and found no joy. He returned claiming study as impractical. The reliable James took a job at Andrewes store. He became reserved and distant.

"So he made a punk's decision at eighteen," Swede said, "and never looked back. He became the world's leading expert on that store; every nook and cranny and item in stock. To this day he can still find button hooks that ain't been used since World War I."

"Which does not explain his actions."

"It likely does," Swede told me, "if you think about the Andrewes store and Andrewes. You probably figure that store stays alive because of the town, and you figure wrong. The store is what holds all the power here. The town stays alive because of the store."

For a moment it seemed I owned someone else's memory, or someone else owned mine. Once, long ago, I wished to really study history, and really write it. Now I only record the events of a Victorian town gone stale.

"We all stayed too long," Swede said, "we stayed too long. Check with Mad Willie for the rest of it. He's the only sane man in town."

"And you are not?"

"I'm part of the store," Swede said, and said it sadly. "So are you, but Willie, nope." Swede returned to drink and silence as I departed.

Unlike most village idiots, Willie is not easily found. I walked, knowing a day or two might pass before we met. One generally discovers Mad Willie in search for mushrooms and roots and herbs, or conversing with cattle in a near valley. His Indian and Filipino forebears combine in his sturdy frame. He strolls costumed in ragtag clothing from charity bins of churches. Animals delight in his presence, and children follow him until called away by fearful parents.

Gentle Reader, some Victorians were honest men and true, as, sometimes, are we. I must not debase a hundred years of toil without exceptions. And, when the rapacious 19th century gave way to the 20th, only the century changed. Victorian minds and values did not disappear because of dates on a calendar. Notions of "progress" continued. Nineteenth century trading posts would be replaced by a beatitude of goods in 20th century shopping malls.

And we, like they, write history every day while horror walks. We plant

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gardens as ghettos rise in flame. We tsk over dry cleaning bills while statesmen name themselves honorable men. This augers ill. Able Andrewes, gentleman, did not intentionally join in corruption, but corruption reaches forth and implicates. Victorians killed hundreds of thousands, while Andrewes' trade built this town. Victorian houses, once gorgeous, line our streets. We live in them, preserve them, and our century kills millions.

I stood before dawn outside Andrewes' store. James would soon arrive, and through the early streets our people passed: Paul Stenkey trudging toward the post office where he will sort and curse colorful flyers advertising goods, Madge Plummer to the weekly paper where she will report quibbles from city hall, and Jason Preston, young developer who is always three dollars short and two days late. I thought of long nights of correspondence at my store. Much of my income derives from rare books sold by mail to collectors.

Lights flared from the store as the Andrewes boys prepared for the business day. The store towered in darkness, and stained glass windows seemed to leap toward the mist. The windows rose like candles, or like colorful lamps of Victorian pride. Red and purple and blue mixed with oranges, yellows, greens, and browns. Here and there a spark of crystal twinkled, and here and there other glass shone black as polished ebony. Figures in stained glass — fishermen and loggers, carpenters and peat miners, draftsmen and bartenders — seemed to move because of the mist, slowly counting days of endless toil. Far away a church bell tolled.

"Willie heard you calling," a voice said behind me. I turned to find Mad Willie dressed as a harlequin; faded yellow pants, red shirt, green cap. Willie may be mad, but he is well read, having mooched my castoff books for years. His broad, olive-colored face shone with enthusiasm. He carried bunches of wild carrots and wild celery.

"I didn't call."

"You did," he said, "or else it's magic. But, just think of cows, just think of them. Cows don't miss much. Some are even Methodist." He perfervidly began to explain bovine doctrines.

"We have a mystery unlikely solved by cows," I told him.

"Unlikely solved by anyone else," he told me, "plus some are Presbyterian." He watched through dark mist as a milk truck pulled up before the store. The driver stepped slowly down, as if in dispraise of cows. "Miracu-

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lous," Willie breathed. "You put in grass, and out comes milk and cheese and ice cream." His delight sounded as large as his wonder.

"Something dark stalks this town," I said. "James has become peculiar in his way. His reserve is gone and he speaks most kindly. Swede drinks but doesn't care for it. Mamie is indifferent to events, and yet she pries. No one claims to fully understand. If someone does understand, that someone isn't talking."

"James does his eternal job," Willie said seriously. "You do yours. Able Andrewes does his, and maybe some of what happens is wonderful." For a moment the man seemed sane. His lips lost their silly smile, and his broad forehead furrowed with concentrated thought.

"There's wonderment to it," I said with grim voice, "but other words occur. Horror and death, for two."

"Celery," said Willie, and not unhappily. "*Apium graveolens.* In the wild state it is as rank as me, but with broader leaves. It is indigenous to marshy places near the sea. With breeding and blanching celery turns tame. Three varieties are cultivated, green, white, and red. Green is best, but James is white. Very little of the red shows up around here."

"You must be feigning madness," I told him, "while playing court jester spinning riddles." It is impossible to dislike Willie, but also impossible not to become impatient with him.

"James is a master of inventory," Willie said with dignity. "Do not speak of sanity and riddles in the same breath. Your sanity disappeared when you stopped riddling. When questions cease, people buy someone else's dream."

"As James bought Andrewes' dream?"

"And Andrewes, no doubt, bought an even older dream," Willie murmured, sounding his sadness. "Steam power was first used in 1698 by Englishmen, the same year Daniel Defoe suggested better roads and insane asylums." Willie looked toward cathedral windows still illuminated by electricity, more than by the first thin light of dawn. "*Borrow* all good dreams," he whispered, "but in the name of holy spirits don't *buy* them. When you buy, you may own something good, but you also own whatever evil those dreams spawned."

"James is not without honor," I said, feeling somehow that I defended myself more than I defended James.

"James is in the thrall of the store," Willie said. "He changes because he

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has nothing left to lose. And, the store is in the thrall of an elder dream." He cocked his head as if hearing distant voices in the mist. "They sometimes wail at sunrise," he trilled. "Sad spirits call from shallow graves where progress placed them. Oh, this town once produced evil, evil, evil, yes it did."

"But Andrewes only bought and sold."

"And Andrewes wished to honorably work, and honorably raise children, and honorably grow old, and honorably die. But when a man begins to slide it seems like all creation gets greased up for the occasion. Andrewes became implicated. The store became greater than he. The store *became* the dream." Willie pointed to cathedral windows aglow with Victorian ideals, and with work of Victorian hands. His face wrenched with a silly smile, but his voice sounded low, bereaved, whispering horror. "And there he sits, there he sits, he sits...Andrewes." Willie choked, and pointed to a small space high on one window, a window overlooking the harbor. "See how slowly he works because he is old," Willie said bemused, though still muttering as if through pain. "He is old, old, old, and yet he will never die because his sentence is not death, but dying." Willie continued to point. "Dying, but never dead for as long as dreams that put him there exist."

Like cattle, we do not look up, yet walk beneath the stars. I turned to those windows I have passed for six decades, seeing but not seeing; turned toward glass which held the small, black-suited figure of Able Andrewes, his soul become one with his windows. Andrewes, disappearing, but forever present. The dark figure hunched before an account book. A quill pen moved with glacial slowness, yet moved. About him other figures moved, but glacially.

It is the mist I told myself, only mist, and knew I lied. Did Mamie know of this, did Swede? How many knew, yet feared to give their knowledge voice? Did James know? And Charles and Edward, working each day beside this grim eternity?

And yes, James knew, but with charity of newly discovered kindness kept quiet.

"Andrewes tends the store," Willie said, "and so does James. The wild carrot, *Daucus carota*, a member of the family Umbelliferae...."

I turned from Willie, knowing that I would soon be shaking; knowing also, because I am old, that this horror must soon pass into a greater horror. Andrewes' quill pen moved, although one must concentrate to see it, for the

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life of the windows breathes slowly; ancient vapors; Victorian men and ladies caught in near stasis between half-known dreams.

And, yes, James knew. I thought of my own daily round, and the rounds of others in this town while understanding James; that master of inventory.

Who walked, I had no doubt, within the holds of sunken ships, and beside skeletons that once knew dreams. James, a creature of the store, inventorying drowned cargo destined for the store. James, a creature stepping always in behalf of the store, stepping more slowly each year; but always stepping. That genius of inventory.

And yes, I knew that all of us are creatures of the store. We bought Andrewes' dream. The store could not have gained such power otherwise. Now a violent circle closes with quiet violence. When the store became the dream, it made the dream immortal. We are trapped. The future becomes a dirge, belling through heat of day and frost of night above the bones of our fathers.

I might have been a prophet instead of a scribbler, or a true historian rather than a recorder of facts. I might not have been lonely. And, my fellow townsmen, what might they have been? No matter. In a way I am not lonely, for all of my townsmen are encased like Andrewes in his stained glass — trapped with less grace than a bee embalmed in amber, for the bee is dead — while we are only, and eternally — dying. Mamie will eternally gossip. Swede will eternally drink. I will eternally sell old dreams as the newspaper prints old news. Able Andrewes, green grocer, will keep accounts. I turned toward the harbor.

The reliable James appeared, walking toward me through mist to become my comrade as we plod through time. From somewhere in the mist Willie hummed a hymn to morning. James stopped before me.

"It isn't so bad," he said quietly. "But it does go on and on." His moist eyes dulled beyond horror, could no longer see horror. For a moment he trembled, thus still knew some emotion. "People do need things," he said, and visibly controlled his trembling, "but I suppose we should warn the children." Then he tasted the futility of his statement. "They wouldn't listen," he said vaguely, and moved toward the store.

I felt not fear, but anger, and the need to strike. It was a loathsome need. No man of honor, no gentleman, could answer this blow with cruelty. When there is nothing left to lose, one must at least answer as

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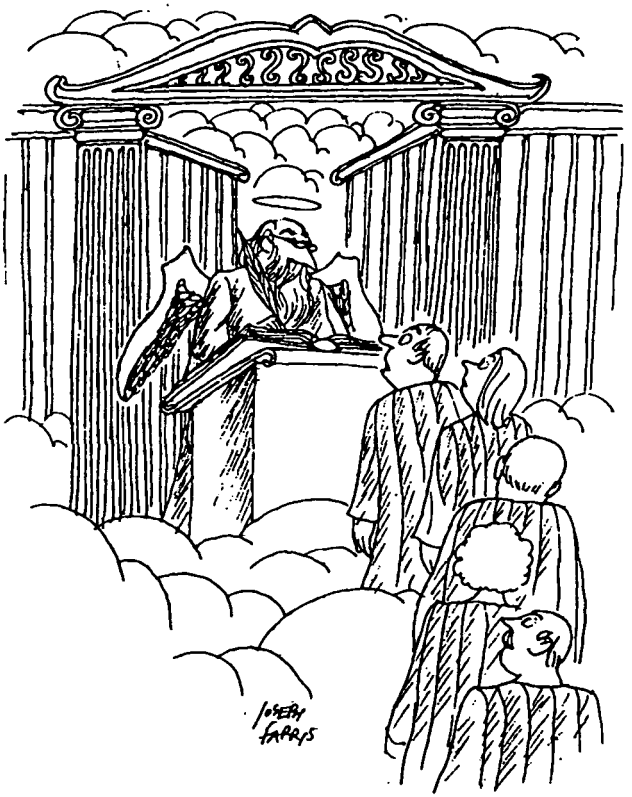
James does, with kindness.

Thin sunlight cut the mist, and stained glass windows dulled before me, Gentle Reader; dulled before me like slow movement through slow aeons. There was aught to say except give thanks — thanks — that — at least — you are spared: for surely you are wise, and do not buy other people's dreams. Surely you, unlike we, are not tending the store; are not, because of the store, enthroned by time forever, or, because of the store, forever perishing.



"You want my social security number*?"*

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Bill Vaughn's short fiction has appeared in Analog. *He lives in the Bay Area with his wife Mary and has worked in the computer industry since 1969.*

This story, he says, came into being when he was invited into an anthology about New York City in the future. He got the idea about a wall around Manhattan then, but wasn't able to use it until years later — too late for the anthology, but just right for us.

The Wall

By Bill Vaughan

AN ELECTRIC CAR ROLLS north on the East Side Highway. It slows, pulls into the breakdown lane, right side close to the Wall, and stops next to a storm drain. In the car is a driver and three passengers.

The driver is called Carrie Nation. She gets out of the car and raises the hood. One of the passengers, a big man called Pancho Villa, opens the rear passenger-side door and goes to the trunk. He strains to lift out a heavy toolbox.

Carrie Nation's green skirt blows and flutters in the hot damp breeze that descends the slope of the Wall from far above. Sweat springs to her brow as she props up the hood. She loosens the collar of her white blouse, rolls up her sleeves, and bends to look into the engine compartment.

Now the front door opens, bangs against the Wall as cars roar past. A young stream of dirty water continues in its course along the base of the Wall, running under the open car door, and trickles through a large grating into the storm drain.

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The front-seat passenger, called Nikolai Lenin, crawls out of the car, keeping his head down. Nikolai Lenin is small and wiry. The car conceals him from the road; the open doors hide him from in front and behind. Only from the top of the Wall, two hundred feet above, might he be seen. He crouches and fumbles with the storm drain's grating, as Carrie Nation putters under the hood.

Nikolai Lenin, Carrie Nation, and Pancho Villa form cell 34-D of the Marine Mammals Liberation Army. Along with one Leo Bugleman, who remains in the car, they intend to breach the Wall Around Manhattan and let in the sea.

Yesterday was Friday.

Over the bass monotone of the great pumps, the alarm clock shrilled. Across the room, Leo Bugleman awoke. He got out of bed, stumbled sleepily to the clock, silenced it with a slap. The kettle was already on the stove. Leo turned on the fire under it and made his way to the bathroom.

The pumps thrummed. The toilet flushed. The shower ran, then the sink. The kettle boiled. Leo emerged from the bathroom, his feet a little steadier now. There was still a blob of lather behind his left ear. He poured boiling water on coffee grounds and dressed as he waited for it to drip.

Buttoning his shirt, Leo stood before his window. It looked east, across Avenue D. Leo sneered out at the Wall.

The Wall was tall and ugly. As high as Leo could see, it was streaked white with seagull droppings, brown with rust, black with the exhalations of a billion diesel trucks. Trickles of dirty water ran down it, joining in polluted rivulets at the base.

Leo tucked his maroon tie between the second and third buttons of his blue shirt, shrugged on his uniform jacket (size forty-four short), swilled a cup of coffee. His eyes never left the Wall. Finally he glanced at his watch, grabbed his cap, and headed for the door.

Down three flights and out to the street. Leo hesitated at the front door, brushed back his thinning brown hair, put on his cap, made sure his earplugs were in. He opened the door, and winced as the sound of the pumps struck him.

The hot Wall breeze had not yet begun; it was chilly and damp in the Wall's shadow. A stream flowed down Avenue D, rushing into the drains at

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the corner of Seventh Street. Leo's nose wrinkled as he hurried past it. His lips moved as he chanted a sing-song litany, inaudible over the pumps:

"God damn Wall.

"Bastard Wall.

"God damn, son of a bitch, bastard Wall."

Pancho Villa sets the toolbox on the concrete by the open rear door and gets back in the car. He leaves the door open.

Between the doors, the grating comes loose. Nikolai Lenin shoves it aside and climbs down into the storm drain.

A patrol car pulls up, an old-fashioned methanol burner, stinking of formaldehyde. A policeman sticks his head out the window.

"Y' wanna move that heap right now, lady, or I'll call the wrecker."

"Just a minute, officer. I think I've got it." Carrie Nation fiddles under the hood, gets back in the driver's seat. Meanwhile, Leo Bugleman crawls out of the car and disappears into the storm drain.

The patrol car pulls up in front of the electric, as Carrie Nation tries the motor. It hums to life. The policeman approaches, swaggering a little. Carrie gets out of the car and meets him halfway. She shows him her driver's license; the name on it is not "Carrie Nation." Her blouse buttons have come open; perhaps she shows him other things. In any case, he does not see Pancho Villa crawl out of the car.

"No problem, officer," says Carrie. "Bad connection to the superconductor. It's fixed." She goes to the hood, closes it. It doesn't quite catch. She raises the hood again and slams it, as Pancho muscles the toolbox into the storm drain and drops down after it. From below, several hands pull the grating back in place.

Carrie Nation saunters around the car, closing doors. She gets back in the driver's seat, revs the engine. Preceded by the patrol car, she pulls out into traffic, leaving three men and a heavy toolbox in a storm drain that runs beneath the Wall.

It was nearly nine.

At Fourth Street, Leo Bugleman crossed Avenue D and hurried into a building that grew out of the Wall. An elevator took him up twenty stories, to the top.

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The elevator opened onto a broad plaza. Here it was bright and warm. You could hardly hear the pumps. Crowds of tourists were beginning to gather, gawking in all directions.

To the east, the ocean was blue-green and clear. Breakers roared over the shattered towers of Brooklyn and Queens. On the horizon stood the Long Islands and the tan sails of the fishing fleet.

To the west was Manhattan, looking much as it had for the last hundred years. The Wall wasn't tall, next to the skyscrapers of Downtown and Midtown — it was easy to ignore.

To the south, seagulls wheeled over the docks by the New Fulton Fish Market. It wasn't new, and it wasn't too close to Fulton Street some two hundred feet below, but that's what they called it.

Leo saw none of this. He glanced at his watch and hurried across the plaza to the Tourist Information Center. Adjusting his cap, he entered by the door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

The emblem on his cap read:

Port Authority of the City of New York
TOUR GUIDE

The first tours of the Wall were about to start.

The tunnel is dark and cramped. Pancho Villa and Leo Bugleman lug the toolbox while Nikolai Lenin goes ahead and scouts. Pancho is taller than Leo and has to duck under conduits to keep from hitting his head. The stream of water at their feet is shallow. It burbles and chuckles, following the drain's gentle downward slope under the Wall, toward the sea.

Nikolai comes back. "It's all right down to the cross tunnel. Come on." He speaks with that accent once called "Brooklyn" or "Joisey." But Brooklyn is drowned now, and so is much of New Jersey. It always was a New York accent — now New Yorkers must admit it.

Leo and Pancho hurry, as well as they can, to the cross tunnel. It is a maintenance tunnel, seldom used. It is relatively dry.

"This goddam nuke is heavy," complains Leo, setting his end down. "At least we're out of the water."

"You're soft," says Pancho. "I tote industrial equipment all the time.

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This ain't no worse." Pancho Villa is muscular. His grandparents came illegally from lost Trinidad, but his speech does not betray them.

"Ain't much plutonium in a nuke," says Nikolai. "Mostly steel and *plastique.* That piece of plutonium's about the size of a — you know — a grapefruit. You remember grapefruit, Leo?"

"Seen one once," says Leo. "Macy's had some in from California. Expensive." He picks up his end of the nuke again, and the three continue down the tunnel.

Leo's first group was from somewhere near Cleveland. They looked wealthy. And bored, as Leo went mechanically through his spiel. At least they all spoke English. Leo could deliver his talk in memorized French, Spanish, and Japanese, but fielding questions was hard. And if you didn't answer questions, you didn't get good tips.

As usual, the children asked most of the questions.

"What's all that water running down the Wall? Is it leaking?"

"No," said Leo for the ten thousandth time, "it's condensation. The Wall is cool, especially near the top where it's thin, because the ocean water is cold." He leaned to pat the kid — an ugly little girl of about five — on the head.

"No, it isn't," said the tyke, pulling away from Leo. "We swimmed in the ocean at Trenton. It was warm."

"And then we got in the boat and sailed over Philadelphia," piped up a little boy. "It was neat, like that," he said, pointing to Brooklyn.

"Is that Philadelphia?" said the little girl. "I wanna go in the boat again, Mommy." She started to sniffle and whine. Her parents looked annoyed. Leo mentally kissed his tip goodbye.

"Like Philadelphia, Boston, and other coastal cities," he said, gamely continuing his spiel, "Brooklyn was abandoned as the Atlantic Ocean rose during the middle of the last century. Manhattan was spared only by chance."

"Didn't they build the Wall on purpose?" heckled a teenager from the back of the crowd.

Ignoring the heckler, Leo continued. "The Wall is almost thirty miles long. The sea water is, on average, one hundred ninety feet deep, and presses on the Wall with a total force of ninety million tons." No effect. The numbers usually got a rise out of the techno-weenies, but there didn't seem to be any today.

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Leo led his group to the inside edge of the Wall. Near the railing, a life-sized statue of a man looked out over the Lower East Side. The statue was gaudy — green with patina, black and white with pigeon and seagull droppings. Its arms were raised as if in blessing, or victory. On its head was a spot of bright polished bronze.

"This is Christophe O'Flanagan," said Leo, "the Mayor's Haitian-Irish astrologer. In 2027, during the Saint Patrick's Day parade, he had a vision. He said the sea would rise thirty feet. The experts laughed — three feet, they said, maybe six, no more. But New Yorkers believed O'Flanagan — that's what things were like in the Twenties. Then, when the Antarctic ice cap began to slide into the sea — against all predictions — the Wall was already started. For fifty years our heroic engineers worked on it, keeping just ahead of the rising water. At two hundred feet, they stopped." Leo paused. "So did the sea — we hope."

No reaction. Most of the tourists were just looking at the ocean, enjoying the Wall weather.

"This is supposed to be good luck," said Leo. He reached over and patted the statue on the head, on the shiny spot. Some of the tourists did the same.

"I wanna pet the statue," said the little girl. Leo lifted her, held her out. The little girl waved a hand and hit the statue on the nose, on a fresh seagull dropping. "Ewww, yucky!" she said, wiping her hand on Leo's coat.

THE PUMPS are louder now. Pancho and Leo have successfully navigated the cross tunnel. Now Nikolai points to a ladder descending into blackness.

"Old subway tunnel," he says. "Use your earplugs. Hand signals from here on."

Wearing miners' lamps, they descend, lugging the toolbox. The subway tracks are gone; the tunnel floor is a torrent, water rushing toward the pumps below the East River.

(They still call it the East River, that piece of the Atlantic between the Wall and the broken teeth of Brooklyn, where the draggled cobweb of the Brooklyn Bridge lies in wait to snare unwary ships.)

Along the tunnel's wall runs a catwalk, safely clear of the rushing water. The three men and the nuke edge along it until they are well under the Wall.

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At noon, on his lunch break, Leo went down to Embassy Row. It was the first Friday of the month. He was making his rounds.

The sun had cleared the Wall ("God damn Wall," said Leo), and the embassy gardens shone with sunlight. Leo slowed down for a moment to look at the flowers.

From the street vendor at the corner of Sutton Place, Leo got a soft pretzel and a hot dog. Wolfing them down, he hurried into the New Jersey embassy. He didn't need to look at the lobby signboard, but went straight to the visa office.

He pushed his papers across the counter. "Bugleman, Leo. I have an appointment."

"Yes, Mr. Bugleman." The clerk looked like a New Yorker, but she spoke without a trace of New York accent. "I'm afraid I have bad news for you."

"But...I thought I was near the top of the waiting list."

"You are, Mr. Bugleman. You're number twenty-three. In your category. But New Jersey doesn't need civil or mechanical engineers right now."

Or tour guides, thought Leo, *or physicists.* "Well, what *do* you need? I can take more night courses..."

"Well, Mr. Bugleman, if you had, say, a Ph.D. in biomechanical engineering, with a specialty in pseudoviral turboencabulation, you would be eligible for Preference Category VII-A(1). On the other hand, pharmacological statisticians are, you'll pardon me, a drug on the market." She tittered offensively. "Here is a list of the current preference categories. It's good to the end of the month."

Leo took the list — it wasn't long — and glanced at it. His fist clenched, crumpling the corner of the paper. But he smiled and said "thank you," just the same.

Nikolai has been scouting ahead again. Now he returns. Silently, he motions Pancho and Leo to stop. They set the nuclear toolbox down. It clangs loudly on the catwalk.

"What is it?" Pancho shouts to be heard over the pumps.

Nikolai approaches, huddles with Pancho and Leo. "Maintenance crew. Maybe comin' this way. Be quiet."

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The catwalk is exposed. There is no place to hide. They turn off their miners' lamps and sit by the nuke, in the dark. It does not glow, but there seems to be a glow far off in the tunnel.

They wait. After a long time, the glow brightens, resolves into two glows, bobbing in the darkness, approaching.

The water rushes, the pumps roar. Yet the three men sit unmoving, as if their slightest movement would be heard. Leo is hunched together, arms around his knees, head down. Pancho presses against the wall.

Nikolai has a gun, a revolver. Its blued steel is black in the dim light of the oncoming miners' lamps.

Nikolai leans back to the others. He motions to his ears. They remove their earplugs. Leo winces. "Wait till they get close," says Nikolai. "Then we take 'em. Throw the bodies in the water." He goes back to watching the distant lights.

Leo shudders as he reinserts his earplugs.

The lights continue to approach. But there is something odd. They don't seem to be coming straight on anymore.

Leo taps Pancho's shoulder, leans forward and taps Nikolai. "The other catwalk," he says. "They're on the other side."

The maintenance workers approach. Indeed, they are on the other side of the tunnel. The three men and the bomb sit still and silent as the maintenance crew goes past. Once, one of the circles of light scans the water, crosses it, caresses the wall not twenty feet from them. It lingers, then returns. The three men release their breaths in chorus. The nuke remains placid.

After an eternity or two, the maintenance crew is out of sight. Leo, Nikolai, and Pancho get up and turn on their miners' lamps.

"Jesus," says Leo, "Jesus."

"Jesus? I thought you was Jewish," says Pancho.

In the last group of the day, there was a chatty blue-haired lady from Sun City, Arizona. "You must love it here," she said. "The weather's wonderful. Everywhere else it's so hot and muggy."

That did it for Leo. "You like it, huh?" he said. "Nice cool sea breeze. That's Wall weather, lady. That's what makes it Hell down there." He pointed down, toward the base of the Wall.

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The tourist shrank from the energy in Leo's voice. Leo didn't notice. He continued: "That nice cool breeze drops right down the Wall. Picking up steam. Picking up heat. That's freshman physics for you, lady." Leo had taken enough night courses for a Master's. "It's cool up here, but it's plenty hot and muggy down there." Leo waved vaguely in the direction of his apartment building. "We don't all stay at the Wall Hilton, lady. Some of us have to live next door to this thing." Leo kicked at the Wall with his heel.

"Well!" said the tourist. "I never! Your superiors are going to hear about this, Mr. — " She peered at his badge. "Mr. Bugleman." She pronounced it "bug lemon."

"I'll tell you what, lady, you can tell them anything you please." Leo loosened his tie. "because I don't really give a rat's ass." He took off his cap. "I don't give a flying fuck for the Port Authority, and they can KEEP THEIR GOD DAMN WALL!" Leo skimmed his cap like a Frisbee, over the railing, toward the street below. It landed in the bus lane, where it was promptly run over.

Leo didn't even bother to sign out. He took the elevator to the street and went straight to O'Flanagan's Bar.

"This is the spot," says Leo. They are in a disused subway station, deep under the Wall. The pumps are not so noisy here, and there is not so much water. They can talk.

"It better be," says Pancho. "We've lugged this thing far enough." They set the nuke down, none too gently.

"This is it," said Leo. "I know everything about the Wall. Its strong points, its weak points. This is a weak point. Maybe the weakest."

Pancho and Leo sit down by the bomb. Nikolai is scouting the stairwells, and the places where the escalators used to be.

"You hate the Wall," says Pancho. "How come you know so much about it?"

"I used to love the Wall," says Leo. "When I was a kid, they were still building it." He smiles. "They were my heroes — the Wall engineers. I wanted to be one. I wanted to help make the wonders of the post-modern world, the newer Colossus, to replace the Statue of Liberty. And then they went broke."

Pancho shrugs. "We still got the Wall. So what if we don't build nothing

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else. Who needs it?"

"I need it," says Leo. "I studied civil engineering, I studied mechanical engineering, I studied freaking physics of materials, so when they started up again, I could be part of it. For half a century, New York was Number One in construction, and now what have we got? Fifty thousand unemployed engineers, is what."

"So," says Pancho. He seems to be trying to think. "What do you get from this?" He gestures at the bomb. "You think they're gonna rebuild after we set this off? You think they're gonna *hire* you? Sure — hire Leo, the Mad Bomber." Pancho laughs. "Shit, there ain't gonna *be* any New York after we set this off. Just two hundred feet of water and a lot of dead citizens."

"Screw the Wall," says Leo. "I'm sick of New York, sick of the Goddamn Wall. I'll take any job I can find, in California, after we get away. This bastard" (he gestures at the Wall around him) "has burned me out. That's all."

O'Flanagan's wasn't crowded at four in the afternoon. Leo looked around the place as if he had never been there before. The holos of the Wall under construction used to make him nostalgic; now they filled him with bile. He wanted to yell at the big bust of Christophe O'Flanagan behind the bar.

You asshole, Leo thought, *what kind of drugs were you on at that parade? Why make us waste our future? Why build that prison Wall?*

Come to think of it, the whole bar was a pain in the ass. The Twenties decor — all shades of olive and red, with little Gothic spires on the booths, and twin laser chandeliers — was enough to drive you to drink. Maybe that was the idea. Leo ordered another.

Six o'clock came. The bar began to fill with the after-work crowd. Leo nibbled on bar snacks, waiting. There was someone he needed to see.

Finally she arrived. His old friend Shirley Green. Green Shirley, they called her back at CUNY. Here she was with her radical friends, the porpoise freaks. Leo smiled and walked over to their table.

"Hiya, Shirley. How ya doin'? Can I sit down?" Without waiting for an answer, Leo pulled up a fourth chair.

"Jeeze, Leo, don't call me Shirley. Carrie Nation — that's my code name. You know Pancho and Nikolai."

"Yeah, well, code name or not, you're Shirley to me. Anyhow, this is business."

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"Bullshit, Leo. You're drunk. Why don't you go away — something's come up, we're making serious plans."

"Maybe you should listen to me first," said Leo. "You remember that project we talked about, the one you keep trying to suck me into?"

"Oh, yeah," said Shirley. "Using the weak spot in — mmmph." Nikolai had reached across the table and put his hand over Shirley's mouth.

"Don't say it," said Nikolai. "We know what he's talkin' about."

"I've made up my mind," said Leo. "If you can get me out of New York afterward, I'm in."

"Wow! How totally germane!" said Shirley.

Nikolai comes back, swaggering, from his inspection tour. "Nobody," he says, "like we thought. They think we don't know their secret weakness, so they don't guard it." He takes one end of the toolbox and drags it to the center of the platform.

"Shit, Nikolai, it's a nuke," says Pancho. "It don't matter where you put it. Set it up and let's get out of here."

Nikolai looks left and right, drags the bomb another few inches. He pulls out a key, unlocks the toolbox, and raises the lid. Instead of tools, there is a steel panel. On it, two switches and a dial are labeled in Hebrew. Nikolai flips the switches.

Pancho has been looking at the bomb. "So that's where this came from. Christ, it must be old. You think it will work?"

Leo speaks up. "Plutonium bomb — it'll work for hundreds of years. Doesn't need tritium." He glares at Nikolai. "This came from Dimona. It can't be clean. We're fucking radioactive. You son of a bitch."

"Radioactive? Not much," says Nikolai. "Takes over a week to get a lethal dose. It's the cause that matters. We must avenge the whales." He pulls a small box from his shirt pocket. It looks like an old-fashioned calculator.

"I don't give a damn about your cause," says Leo. "I want to get out of New York. And if nuking the Goddamn Wall is what it takes, that's what I'll do. But the whales are dead, along with the tuna and the freaking anchovies. You can't bring them back."

"And you can't bring back the glory days of New York," says Nikolai. "No more than your grandfathers could bring back the space program, or their

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grandfathers the railroads." He punches buttons on the little box.

Pancho speaks. "We can't bring 'em back, but we can take revenge."

Nikolai stops pressing buttons and looks up. "It is programmed. Nothing can stop us now." He places one foot on the bomb. "The whales are dead. Their spirits cry for vengeance." He spreads his arms and shouts, "Now we liberate them! Our — " He hesitates, pulls a white card from his shirt pocket, shines his lamp on it. "Our *auto-da-fé* will free those spirits forever! Let the sea claim New York, as is its due!"

He turns to Pancho. "Did you get that, or shall I do it again?"

Pancho puts a microcam back in his pocket. "I got it. Let's get out of here."

Leo approaches Nikolai. He points to the little box. "Is that the detonator?"

"Yeah," says Nikolai. "This sends the code sequence to set it off. It goes at five tomorrow morning. By then we'll be in California."

"What if we're not?" asks Leo. "What if the boat doesn't come?"

"I can reprogram it," says Nikolai. "And if we're caught, I can detonate it instantly." He indicates a recessed red button on the box. "Now. We go back the way we came?"

Leo pulls out a pocket computer, punches some keys. Nothing seems to happen. He looks nervous, mutters "Goddamn Wall," punches more keys. A blueprint of the Wall appears on his screen. He studies it for a moment.

"Yes," says Leo. "It's the only way."

Leo left the bar smiling. They had bought it — he was in.

He smiled as he walked toward his apartment. *Nuke the Goddamn Wall. What a sight.* He closed his eyes and saw the nuke go off — the hundred-meter hole at the Wall's weakest point — stress fractures racing around Manhattan at the speed of sound in steel — ninety million tons of sea water washing the Wall away as if it had never been.

Outside his apartment building was a telephone booth. Leo entered it, pulled a worn business card from his shirt pocket, and dialed the number on it. The phone rang and rang. Leo let it ring. In his mind, he watched a wall of water wash over his apartment building (no great loss there), scour the Lower East Side, raze Greenwich Village, Park Avenue, Harlem, purge every neighborhood in the city, carry two-point-three million bodies to a mass

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grave in Central Park. He grimaced. *Nuke the Goddamn Wall. How skewed.*

Eventually a gruff voice answered the phone. "NYPD. Dennis."

"This is Leo Bugleman. It's on for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow! That's quick. Where are they? I'll have 'em picked up."

"I don't know where they are, Lieutenant. Shirley said they move every night. And there's the other problem."

"What's that?"

"The nuke. It's remote-controlled. They could set it off."

"Sounds like Plan B, then. You gonna go along with us, Bugleman?"

"Plan B. I spot the detonator, then I call you in. I can do it—I'll find some excuse to use my computer, tell you where to pick us up. What's in it for me?"

"You want out — we can get you out. Not California, though."

"It has to be legal. Passport and all. I need the right to work."

"We can get it. Looks like Pennsylvania or Connecticut — they owe us big ones. Any preference?"

"Shit," said Leo. "Pennsylvania, I guess. Not the garden spot of the world."

"For Christ's sake, Bugleman. You're out of CUNY twelve years and never worked in your field."

"Me and fifty thousand others."

"Yeah, well, nobody wants them, either."

ON THE WAY back, Nikolai swaggers and brags. Pancho is the cautious one now. He looks for lights in the distance, tries to listen for noises through the din. Leo stays close to Nikolai but does not try to speak.

They reach the access tunnel easily, and are greeted by the stink of diesel and methanol fumes. Leo blinks in the bright light. Pancho moves cautiously to the grate, looks up through it. Carrie Nation's car is again parked there. Its rear passenger-side door is open.

Pancho and Leo move the grating aside. Leo climbs up, reaches down, and takes Nikolai's hands to help him up. He hoists Nikolai out of the tunnel.

Suddenly there are uniforms everywhere, and guns. "Freeze! Police!" shouts a voice. Rough hands seize Leo and Nikolai. They are pinioned, spread-eagled. Nikolai's gun is taken.

Pancho sticks his head up, looks around. "Oh, shit!" he cries and

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disappears back down the tunnel. Two policemen go down after him.

"I'm Leo," says Leo. "Let me go."

One of the police, a paunchy sergeant, looks at a holo he is holding. "You look like him." He inspects Leo closely. "This guy is okay. Let him go."

As Leo is released, shots ring hollowly from the tunnel. Nikolai's captor, startled, loses his grip on Nikolai's right arm. Nikolai reaches for his shirt pocket.

Leo is faster. Before Nikolai can get to the detonator, Leo has it. "It's okay," he shouts, "I have it." He looks at the little black calculator and its recessed red button.

Reporters are there, with microcams and sound equipment. They take pictures of Nikolai being handcuffed.

A policeman emerges from the tunnel. "We got him," he says.

A police colonel, all gold braid and swagger stick, comes up to Leo. There is a deputy mayor with him. "You're a hero," says the politician. "You've saved New York."

"Screw New York," says Leo. "They said I could emigrate."

The police colonel looks sour around the mouth. "It's been arranged. Pennsylvania will take you. Your papers are being prepared."

The deputy mayor beckons to the reporters. As the microphones press in, he takes Leo's hands, struts a little for the cameras. He draws a breath and begins to speak.

"The citizens of New York thank you. You have saved the wonder of the post-modern world, the spirit of New York City — our Wall." He gestures at the Wall, points up to its rim, where the bronze statue blesses the city. "The Wall Around Manhattan, for which so many heroic engineers labored for so long. And foremost among those heroes, the first and the latest — Christophe O'Flanagan and — " he pauses, smiles for the cameras, and pumps Leo's hand — "Leo Bugleman." He pronounces it "bug lemon."

Leo turns toward the Wall. He thinks of green Pennsylvania fields but sees streaks of rust and grime. He thinks of bird songs but hears the raucous cry of seagulls. He thinks of escape, but feels the anguish of two-point-three million imprisoned souls.

Leo looks up and sees Christophe O'Flanagan, overlooking Manhattan like a warden. The hot damp Wall breeze strikes his face. His eyes blur, and he sees another figure by Christophe — Leo himself, a deputy warden in

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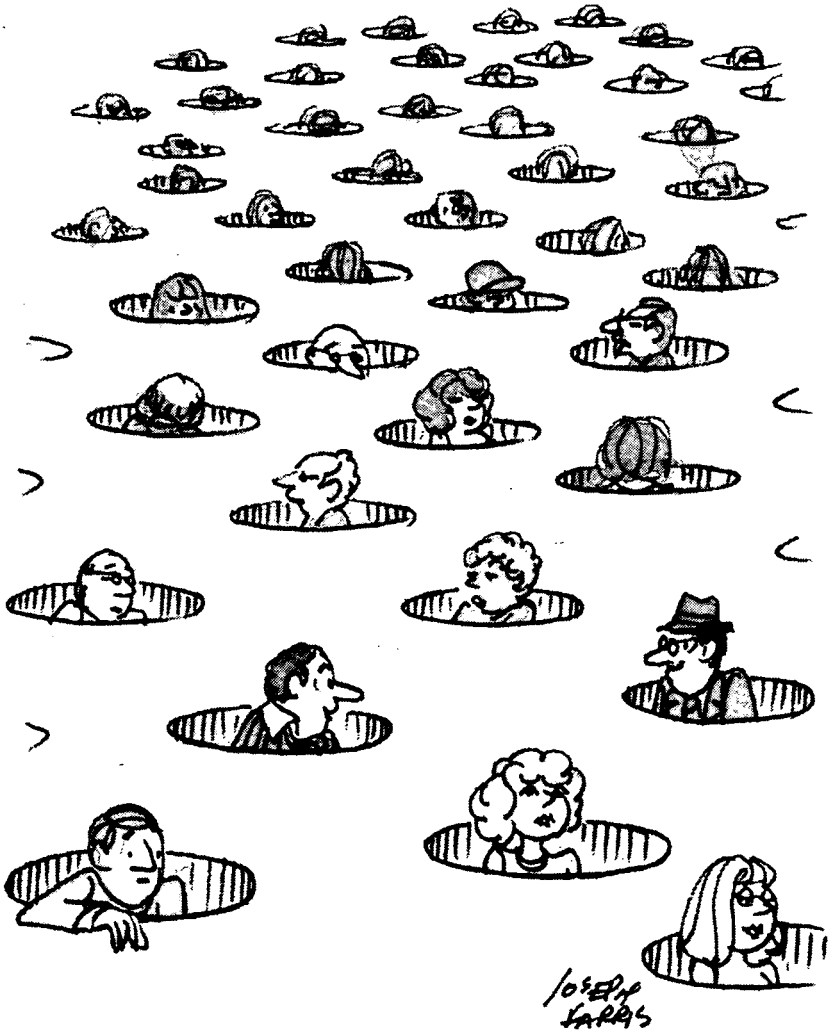
bronze. *I saved your Wall,* he thinks — *I saved your Goddamn Wall.*

Ninety million tons of water whisper to Leo, pressing, promising. He looks at the deputy mayor, at the police colonel. He thinks of Pennsylvania. A tear rolls down his cheek, then another.

"Goddamn Wall," he says quietly, and presses the red button.



"I think we should all be thankful we have a hole of our own."

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Not the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction

INTRODUCTION

SCIENCE FICTION is big. Bigger than big, actually. In fact, science fiction is *huge*. The field as we know it today would give H.G. Wells an inguinal hernia if he tried to lift it. And Jules Verne wouldn't even attempt the feat, bourgeois *fablieau-meister* that he was.

Imagine our chutzpa and hubris then. The magnitude of it shocks even us, who are relatively shockproof, having collectively professionally weathered nearly a century of assaults, both from the unforgiving science-fictional community itself and from the brash world outside the cloistered venue (or should that be "venereal clyster"?).

For what we have attempted with this volume — a wholesale (retail, at finer bookstores everywhere: $69.95), wide-reaching, deeply revisionist revision of the first, garishly-illustrated-with-*déclassé*-pulp-artwork edition — is nothing less than a complete summation and over- and under-view of the field we all love in the same way Othello loved Desdemona.

In other words, we have walked in the footsteps of giants, amazed at their scat, and emerged a trifle fragrant, yet undismayed, with our appreciation for the wonder and mystery of that miraculous phenomenon we denominate by the imprecise yet fixed-in-pulp term "science fiction" intact.

And we intend to continue. The years to come will see a never-ending flow of emendations and updates, copious, ennervatingly painstaking, and, perhaps, tendential. But so be it.

For together, we are as big as science fiction.

John Kluge
Peter "Wooden" Nickles
Brian Tablecloth

CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

A whole damn lot.

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Cross-references are indicated by the riding-off-in-all-directions symbol, as thus: <>.

Facts both arcane and mundane from this volume may be inserted into reviews, conversations, speeches, lovemaking, or blurbs for varied effects, a patina of erudition being, naturally, the primary one. Additionally, the sheer physical bulk of the *corpus* makes it effective in a number of ways: doorstop, paperweight, tableleg-support, anti-personnel weapon, among others.

Publisher (<> SAINT MARTY'S PRESS), editor (<>VAN GUILDER, GORDON), and authors (<>YOU KNOW WHOM) disclaim all responsibility for any damage to career, property, life, or limb resulting from misapplication of NOT THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION.

And now, to freely adapt an instance of Hollywood bonhomie: bring on the clones!

ADVANCES The history of recompense via currency and/or tangible goods prior to physicalization of a text in the science fiction field is one rife with misinformation, based as reports of such "advances" frequently are on the boastings of authors and publicists intent on topping the figures of rivals much in the manner of playground comparison of penile dimensions (<>SEX — OR WHAT PASSES FOR IT — IN SCIENCE FICTION). All in all, a mine field for the intrepid scholar like myself (<>KLUGE, JOHN). Yet despite such imprecise data, we can adduce the bare essence of a trend: advances get bigger over time.

Starting with the fabled meal of Illyrian figs which HOMER received once prior to a recitation of Book XII of the *Iliad*, advances have steadily — well, advanced. The next most notable advance after Homer's is that received by Jonathan SWIFT for his *The Rule of Feminina: Pestilence or Abomination?* (chap, 1725), which consisted of a bay gelding, a case of tawny port, and five acres in the London suburb of Carking Fardels. Other notable pre-Gernsback instances are:

At his specific request, Edgar Allan POE received from the Baltimore firm of Pym and Sons a silk-lined casket complete with periscope in exchange for agreeing to write novelizations of a series of stereopticon slides (<> FAMOUS NEUROSES IN SCIENCE FICTION).

M.P. SHIEL received an Oriental mail-order bride for his future-war novel *The Seven-Hundred-Dollar Hammer* (1898).

Arthur Conan DOYLE received a

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gold-inlaid ouija board with platinum planchette for his autobiography, *Don't Call Me Conan the Barbarian!* (1915).

The history of advances becomes considerably less interesting once these eccentric bibliofiscal brummagem were generally replaced by cold hard cash. Still, some landmarks exist.

Isaac ASIMOV was first to break the five-hundred dollar barrier for a trilogy.

Robert HEINLEIN was the first to have his work optioned by Hollywood for upwards of one thousand dollars (not counting innumerable studio-purchased luncheons).

Larry NIVEN and Jerry POURNELLE were the first to demand — and get — an entire state (Montana) as payment. (Ostensibly, they are hardening it for post-comet-strike survival.)

And Arthur C. CLARKE has recently been awarded title to Sri Lanka in exchange for his next five books (<>SCIENCE FICTION WRITTEN BY AI's), with the twin provisos that he banish all terrorism and also increase tourism by twenty-five percent.

What does the future of science fiction hold in the way of advances?

The stars are ours!

[JK]

BLIMP, ANTHONY (1914-1943) British author who died tragically young in World War II, when, as a member of the RAF, he tried — foresightedly, but with a lack of true engineering discipline — to attach rockets to his plane. Known primarily as a transportation enthusiast — he had been a nationally ranked train-spotter as a youth — he concentrated in his two novels on the future of motorways. In *The Colour of His Tyres* (1940), the protagonist develops a car with primitive forms of cruise control and air-conditioning, equipped with twin Victrolas providing stereophonic sound. In *This Lorry Stops at Frog-Crossings* (printed posthumously by FOSSIL PRESS, 1991), the driver of the eponymous vehicle is the first to uncover a plot by aliens in amphibious disguise (<>RIDICULOUS INVASIONS).

[BT]

BREAKUP A term used in this volume to indicate a work which can be seen in temporal and spatial retrospect as part of a larger whole. For example: *Dune* (came out sometime in the Sixties) is a *breakup* of the entire *Dune series* (ended roughly, um, let's see, don't rush me now, I've got it — when Herbert died!).

[PN]

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DEVOLUTIONARY SCIENCE FICTION US magazine, six different printers from 1939-1940, as no bills were ever paid. First issue was a SLICK, second was KING-SIZED BEDSHEET, third was QUEEN, fourth was mere BUNKBUD, fifth was ONIONSKIN, last a one-page BROADSIDE (<>GALS IN SCIENCE FICTION). True to its name, DSF grew steadily more primitive with each issue. Its editor understandably remained anonymous (rumours abound that it was the semi-legendary Harry DERO), and no stories of lasting value were published, except perhaps Jack WILLIAMSON's early "Hole in the Ozone Layer," which would supplicate to be seen as remarkably prophetic, save for the nominative hole being caused by CFC-exhaling worms from Neptune (<>NEAR MISSES).

[JK]

EPIPHYTE Term borrowed from botany, a real science (<>COLLECTED WORKS OF BRIAN TABLECLOTH, THE), denoting a plant which relies for support and structure on another. Used in this volume to denote a work of fiction which borrows (to perhaps a legally actionable degree) more or less of its *raison d'être* from a previous work. *Exemplia gratia:* "Some would contend that the *Shannara* books are epiphytic on *Lord of the Rings.*"

[BT]

INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE The turgid, occasionally melodramatic syzygy between the field of science fiction and the IRS (the US equivalent of the more famous UK Inland Revenue) can be broken down (<>BREAKUP) into two parts: 1) the IRS as portrayed in science fiction; and 2) real-life tangles between authors and auditors (a fortuitous homology).

A short list of citations regarding the first are: *When the Vile Sixteenth Amendment Ruled the Globe* (1913), by I.M.N. ENERCHYST (possibly a pseudonym); "Taxmen, Go Home!" (1953), by Frederic BROWN; *A Plague of G-Men* (1971) by Keith LAUMER; and "Now Big Government Wants Your Organs!" (1985) by David BRIN.

With regards to the second category, we can spotlight such well-known incidents as Philip K. DICK's declaration of all his cats as dependents, and his subsequent payment of assessed late-taxes in the form of bags of cat-kibble; Harold FAIRCLOTH's insistence that as a diagnosed multiple-personality he was entitled to multiple personal exemptions; and Lloyd LLANGNIAPPE's assertion that as a "citizen of the galaxy" (<>HEINLEIN-INDUCED DELUSIONS) he would only file under the jurisdiction of Sirius IV.

[JK]

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MAJOR MOTLEY UK newspaper comic-strip (1941-1945), whose eponymous, somewhat epigonic character, assisted by his young sidekick, the wily Cockney Bert Smallparts, fought Nazis vigorously with an assortment of super-scientific, ultra-Anglo armaments, notably a "London-fog" projector, a radium-laced Excalibur, and a flock of budgies with explosives strapped to their tiny bodies (<>BAT-BOMBS AND OTHER STUPID WEAPONS). Toward the end of its run, four-year-old Michael MOORCOCK contributed some scripts (<>SCIENCE FICTION WRITTEN BY TODDLERS).

[PN]

NOT THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION A compendium of *bon mots, aperçues,* and epiphanies revolving around, but not centered on, that field of literature whose necessary but not exclusionary signifiers are: speculation, fabulation, consternation, agitation — and the disdain of outsiders, some of whom are ourselves (*pace* POGO).

[JK/PN/BT]

POLYNESIAN SCIENCE FICTION The history of archipelagic science fiction is a rich and deep tapestry which cannot possibly be done justice to by anything less than a full-length study (<>THE AUTHORS WORE GRASS-SKIRTS, BY PETER NICKLES). From the astonishing interstellar canoe voyages written by Chief Ahoeitu (Tonga); to the cycle of weather-control tales written by the Gilbertese author Bue; to the tales of genetic engineering (which admittedly do not employ any of the technology we traditionally and prejudicially associate with such endeavors) by proto-feminist Kahausibware of the Solomon Islands (she actually ate two of her husbands!), the science fiction of the South Pacific (<>MICHENER, JAMES: BROADWAY) stands as a rich resource for professional critics of more well-furrowed ground or -paddled seas.

[PN]

PRAECOX, D. MENTIA Albanian-born, later US author (1938-1988), institutionalized for his entire adult life, whose output of science fiction was discovered only after his death, written on rolls of toilet-tissue with fingerpaints. DMP's *oeuvre* is remarkable for its notched-up levels of Van-Vogtian paranoia (DMP was clinically diagnosed with same) and its Neo-Kafkian *weltschmerz*. His most outstanding work is perhaps *The Walls Have Ears — and Noses!* (1965-1969, his "foil-lined-hat" period).

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DMP is an author whose time has arguably come — and gone.

[JK]

QUINCE, KIMBERLY (1971-) Primarily known for her fantasy novels (her first trilogy consisted of *Ring of Rings, Sword of Swords,* and *Dragon of Dragons* [All 1990; written during senior year of high school during study periods]), KQ is included here both in recognition of her lone SF novel *Sword Against Dragons in the Rings* (1991), a rousing space opera set in the orbits around Saturn, and also to bulk out the few entries for this unjustly neglected letter of the alphabet.

[JK]

SMELL ME DEADLY! Film (1961). Concerning itself with the schemes of an embittered Madison Avenue ad-man (Jack Lemmon) who agrees to help launch an addictive underarm deodorant (<>FANDOM) concocted by a mad tycoon (Vincent Price), whose downfall is finally brought about by the combined efforts of a lone lab technician (James Dean) and his lovely girlfriend (Annette Funicello), *SMD* can be seen as an early repudiation and satirization of the Establishment, a precursor of the New Wave — or simply as a laughable abomination, all prints of which should be sunk in the Marianas Trench.

[PN]

TRENCHERMAN, TERENCE UK author (1998-1937) who suffered from the rare disease known as Merlin's Syndrome. Living backward in time, TT reversed the usual course of a writer's life, moving from weak, played-out works through those of a vigorous and assured mid-career, to novels and stories of bright promise, finally ending by publishing his juvenalia. Naturally, TT's strong suit was his "predictive" abilities, which were in his case actually "retrodiction." As a one-year-old, he and his parents, recipients of a retroactive 1966 TAFF grant, attended the first Worldcon in New York, where TT was honored for what he would one day achieve (<>AWARDS, AWARDS, AND YET MORE AWARDS.)

[JK]

ZOOLOGICAL SCIENCE FICTION Although still in its formative stages, the study of science fiction among terrestrial species other than *Homo sapiens* holds the promise of providing the field with valuable insights into the mental, bodily, and cultural parameters which unconsciously shape human science fiction.

Science Fiction of the higher pri-

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mates and cetaceans, of course, is well-known and is covered elsewhere in this volume (<>SCIENCE FICTION BY APES AND CHIMPS; SCIENCE FICTION FROM MARINE-WORLD). This entry concentrates on all other species.

Whether we focus on the speculations of the termites of Mound Fifty-five in Kenya as to the possibility of non-hive intelligence, or the work of the lone vulture affectionately dubbed by his translators as "Herbert von Carrion," whose forte is imagining strange cultures that employ fire to char their food and are limited to ground travel, we are astonished and enlightened by the range of possibilities presented to us, and by the apparent determination of all living things to create some kind of science fiction.

In fact, we may go so far as to say that science fiction is the sole biological imperative that unites all carbon-based life.

Further reading: Flipper and Friends, ed. Martin GREENBERG and Willy the Whale; *Great SF by Wet, Squishy, Fanged, Furry, Scaly Things*, ed. by Dr. Moreau. *Birds Do It, Bees Do It, Even Writers of the Future Do It*, ed. Elephant Gerald.

[BT]

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Robin Wilson is another F&SF veteran whose byline we haven't seen for a while. He spent the last few years finishing his term as President of California State University, Chico. He is now President Emeritus and Trustee Professor at California State University, Monterey Bay, a new campus being established on what was once the site of the U.S. Army's Fort Ord.

About the story, he writes, "It has seemed to me that fantasy — and especially the branch of it doing business as science fiction — has always manifested itself in two principle modes. Mode one is stories about familiar people in weird but understandable worlds (20,000 Leagues Under the Sea) *and mode two is stories about weird but understandable people in familiar worlds* (Visitor from a Small Planet). *Of course, these are ends of a spectrum, but because I'm pretty interested in writing a gloss on our times I tend toward the latter more than the former, although this story is really about familiar people whose world has grown weird on them and they come to realize it when a weird guy comes along..."*

To the Vector Belong...

By Robin Wilson

A HANDSOME YOUNG MAN whose broad shoulders stretch orange coveralls with "ALAMEDA COUNTY JAIL" stenciled on the back hunches over his shot glass of Black Label and prints liquid circles on a scarred Formica bar top as he ponders the deaths of the two who have preceded him. "Some kinda internal screw-up. A flitch? But what they told us was, in penetrations of Category I societies like this it's just as likely to be some little thing like the goddamn packaging as anything else," he says to Jake Lindstrom.

"Glitch," says Lindstrom. "Not flitch. Go on, tell me about it." He has sprawled patiently for nearly four hours on the end stool at the dark bar, his back propped against a stub of wall. He is gangly and so fair he looks ghostly in the gloom, hair blond enough to be almost white. Much of it is. He is twenty days away from retirement after more than thirty-five years in the Department of Justice as a Contract Agent, mostly under cover of one depth or another.

"Glitch," repeats the young man, whose name sounds to Lindstrom like

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Al or maybe Earl. "Well, it couldn't have been something that simple," he says. "The other guys never even got started."

Lindstrom nods encouragingly, as if he understands what the young man is talking about. He is good at friendly interrogation, elicitation, but he has a reputation as a loner, a little eccentric, sometimes hard for desk people and supervisors to deal with. He gets results but he is not an inside guy, has never been seriously considered for Civil Service status.

On this late Tuesday afternoon in early January, two years into the 21st century, he feels his sixty-one years. His back aches and so does the knee he racked up kicking away a CS canister in Grant Park in 1968, and there is a sore spot high on the left side of his ribcage from the little Dan Wesson .38 they insisted he carry; a matching spot on the right side where a Guardian Model 412 audio pickup and transmitter is about to run out of battery.

The young man is Lindstrom's prisoner, technically a deportee under Section 1103 of Chapter 75 of Title 18 of the United States Code but actually the first genuine, honest-to-God extraterrestrial anyone outside supermarket tabloid fantasy has ever encountered.

The dim saloon is empty, the bartender and two regulars flushed out hours ago to tell their stories in excited voices to the frenzied crowd of journalists and video paparazzi beyond the police lines. It is a dreary old establishment located for more than sixty years on the street level of the Port of Oakland container ship pier at the foot of Ferro Street. At a little after five PM the light outside is already fading into soft Bay chill. Only an occasional siren or police whistle penetrates the neon buzz of an Anchor Steam Beer sign above the cash register and the soft susurrus sung by all old industrial buildings.

"What do you suppose was the problem?" prompts Lindstrom again.

"Jesus, you study your ass off," says the alien, who speaks an amazingly fluent American English with no accent. "Master two, three languages right down to the last idiot, pick up on gestures and folkways and history and culture, and then it's something dumb like the goddamn packaging that can give you away."

"*Idiom*, Al. Not idiot," says Lindstrom, who has raised children and corrected them and whose fascination with the young man is only a little tempered by his fatigue. He is also a little worried that his involvement in this case will bring him too much exposure. He has all his life thrived on

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anonymity, living a fresh cover story with nearly every new assignment, and because of his frequent posting from one bureau in Justice to another, his hold on a federal pension is not as firm as he might wish. Bureaucrats achieving notoriety are invariably punished one way or another by their bureaus.

"Id-i-om," chants Al mechanically, his young man's mind still engaged by the excitement of his perilous passage. "We got miles of tape and film and even aerosols the remotes collected so's we'd get the smells right and know a fart from a flower and by God we learned it all to about point nine nine nine, and then it's the goddamn packaging or something else indigenous that's equally dumb that you gotta do right. We could handle most of it in training, I mean, like the first pop-top beer can. I had practice with the damn thing at the academy although my hands, you know, when I first got there my hands were a little weak from the amputations, but I could handle it.

"And I could deal with a bunch of coat hangers, which aren't exactly packaging, but just about as big a pain in the ass to someone who's never seen one before. But boy, the shrink pack stuff, until you know it's *supposed* to be broken you can spend a hell of a time poking around, trying to find the tear strip or button or pry point or whatever, trying not to let on to anyone that you haven't, you know, opened a million of the things, and screw up the whole tamale."

He stops abruptly and drains his glass, setting it back on the bar with a clink and shaking his head, aware suddenly of his own volubility. "But then none of it mattered." He pauses to examine his empty glass, puzzled. "This is an overt penetration and I guess I could of showed up dressed in *ergli* — chicken feathers with a bone in my nose and it wouldn't have made any difference."

"Not tamale," says Lindstrom. "Enchilada. It's an idiom from the Watergate affair thirty years ago, back in the seventies. The whole enchilada."

"Yeah, we read about that." Then, chanting: "The whole *en-chil-ad-a*" to Lindstrom's nod of approval.

"Okay, Al," says Lindstrom, picking up on Al's confusion about his preparation. "Why such elaborate training? How come all the preparation so you could pass for a native, and then whacko! you drop naked as jay bird on the busiest dock in Oakland at damn near high noon with half of Northern California looking on?"

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"I don't know, Jake. I'm just damn glad I made it and didn't — uh — abort," said Al. "That's what happened to the last two guys. Got down and out and got to severance when the mother told them the time, but then they couldn't get the — uh — shell open fast enough to save their ass and she had to withdraw them...."

"The mother?" said Lindstrom.

"Yeah. How we, how I got here. The mother — " He broke off, at a loss for a description of the indescribable. "Uh — I guess, think of an ovipositor on a, like a bug, only it works across space, I guess, and — uh — sorta time."

Lindstrom has only a dim grasp of the concept. Someone on the other end of the wire would dig up an expert.

Aware of their listeners, he drains his glass and says: "And so here you are. Just for the record, let me ask one more time why you're here. Who are you and what's your mission, Al?"

Al shrugs. "Shit, Jake. I'd tell you if I could. I got this memory goes back maybe eight, ten hours, and then except for training and the academy it's zeppo. I guess I know I've been *this*" — he points a thumb at his chest — "only since the time at the academy, but I don't remember anyone else I've been."

Jake nods and does not bother to correct "zeppo." He is not going to learn what he is now convinced Al doesn't know. "My people are going to get antsy if we don't show pretty soon," he says. "Any little thing would help." He half refills each glass, emptying the square bottle. "Little things can mean a lot,"

Al sips and prints three circles interlocking. "Yeah, I know that one. And little things come in big packages and how little we know and little old New York and O little town of Bethlehem and — "

"Al." Lindstrom cuts him off quietly.

"Okay. But can you imagine what it's like? All those — uh — I guess *years* in the academy? Getting your own language and culture and biography wiped and practice, practice with new stuff? Getting the littlest finger on each hand cut off just because polydactylism has only a five decimal point occurrence on this planet? Go through all that shit and then blow the whole thing because of some last minute glitch in the process? Can you imagine what it must have been like for the two guys who didn't make it? All that loneliness for nothing? Can you see why I feel so great to make it okay into this system?"

"I been wondering about that," says Lindstrom, actually wondering why

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a man in custody in a bar ringed with enough firepower to subdue the Malay Peninsula would consider himself to have been successful in his mission, whatever in the unimaginable name of God that was. "The extra finger. You mind if I ask you something personal?" He is now tired beyond the point where he much gives a damn, and as usual under such circumstances, he is feeling antic, wants to give the listeners out in some command center, probably a van over in Alameda, something to think about. It is the kind of thing that over the years has prompted comments from his superiors about attitude.

"Shoot."

"If they hadn't of cut it off, what in hell would the sixth little piggy do?"

Al looks blankly at his miniature sea of circles for a moment. Then, "Oh! Yeah! 'This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home.'"

"Yes," says Lindstrom, "and the last one, the fifth one...?"

"Right," says Al, "and me with a sixth finger that doesn't fit the rhyme." And then in a high pitched version of his mechanical chant of memorization, he sings, "Wee, wee, wee, I can't find my way home." He pauses. "Wherever that is. Jake, what happens next? I mean to me?"

"Don't know."

There is, Lindstrom notes, a tilt to the brow over the alien's left eye, the blue one, that he believes connotes wry amusement at this minor imperfection in his amazing adaptation to a strange world. This guy, thinks Lindstrom, is well schooled, like Japan is prosperous. But why?

On their way out they pause in the men's room and Lindstrom relieves himself of the afternoon's drink. It is an awkward maneuver to perform one-handed, but his left wrist is now cuffed to Al's right. Although they had matched consumption drink for drink, Al has no need for relief, nor does he show any sign of intoxication. Lindstrom wonders idly if this results from alien physiology or simply the third of a century difference in their ages. Time is also a great estranger, he thinks. Twenty-five-year-old Jacob Lindstrom, the Berkeley dropout going under cover for the Justice Department task force on the 1965 Viola Liuzzo murder down in Selma, is just about as alien to the retiring Jake Lindstrom as the guy on the other end of the cuffs, who continues to chatter, eyeing the men's room fixtures with curiosity. Strange versions of familiar things fascinate: round doorknobs in the United States; handles in Europe. What in hell do urinals look like where Al comes from?

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Not everyone has fled the building for the police lines; in one of the booths behind them, an exuberant flatulence sounds. In another, a Hispanic voice says: "*¡Hey, que?*" The perpetrator responds in a strained voice, "*¡Esta musica!*" and both occupants laugh in throaty gasps. Al laughs too. Spanish must be one of his languages, thinks Lindstrom. He shakes himself and thinks of the sheer weirdness of the day, his participation in an event of historical importance—*the first alien contact!*—acted out in a seedy Oakland bar and set to the music of elimination.

He zips, rinses his hand, and leads his prisoner out to the little Ford electric with the red INS logo parked in the bar plug-in. The Chief Federal Marshal has gambled that a long unstructured and recorded debriefing will get them maximum information on the alien; they were in the saloon a long time. The car battery had been low to begin with and now it takes everything off his debit card to pay out the charge.

He toggles on and the line of Oakland policemen parts for them—Lindstrom notes they are now reinforced by California Highway Patrol officers and, he is sure, federal units somewhere off in the darkness—and forms an escort for them up the deserted Nimitz Freeway. Beyond them are the TV cameras with their low-light, long lenses recording them in detail and a news-hungry populace that will have Al for dinner every night for weeks. And probably me too, Lindstrom thinks.

And then Mars lights flicker as far ahead as he can see across the Bay Bridge toward the temporary isolation facility on Turk Street where he is to deliver Al. Nothing has so borne in on him the enormity of the event as the fact that the Bay Bridge has been cleared of traffic during rush hour. As he drives, his passenger avidly peering into the approaching canyons of San Francisco, Lindstrom thinks about his pension and his precarious position.

How in hell am I going to get out of this one?

JUST AFTER lunch the next day, Wednesday, Lindstrom stands at a lectern before a dozen scientists in a darkened room in what was once the Saks Fifth Avenue store in the Stanford Shopping Center in Palo Alto. Here the Stanford Research Institute is housing the just-formed Extraterrestrial Task Force, already referred to by its staff as "ET-EF." A few people wear white or green lab coats. Lindstrom has the only necktie. In his left hand is a control button;

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in his right a laser pointer. On the screen behind him is a brilliantly illuminated full-figure video freeze of Al nude, side and front. His musculature is spectacular, bordering on but not quite unhuman; there is a thoroughly human look of embarrassment and resignation on his face.

"I represent the Immigration and Naturalization Service," says Lindstrom, "and I have been asked to report to you on the disposition of the extraterrestrial that we have in custody.

"As you may know, Al or Earl is the fifth extraterrestrial reported anywhere in the world. Two have been noted in Third World settings — in Indonesia and Brazil — and both have disappeared, or at least evaded custody. Three have been found in the Bay Area since early December. Two have returned almost immediately to the organism or device which brought them, which we've been calling the doughnut. This is a toroidal biological mass that we have been unable to inspect closely enough to know much about. In each case, the doughnut appears without traceable access a hundred meters off the western extremity of an Oakland pier at an altitude of two meters above the decking. When the doughnut reaches the end of the pier, the — uh — alien drops to the deck encased in a placenta-like material and engages in a rapid series of actions to free himself. In the first two incidents spaced about a week apart, some sort of failure occurred and the alien disappeared in a fairly messy manner back into the center of the mass.

"As you have seen from video coverage," Lindstrom continues in the stilted lecture room voice he acquired during a teaching stint at the FBI academy when it was still in Quantico, "this mass dilates and then contracts around the alien and then disappears, leaving no trace other than what we suppose are metabolic by-products which I understand are now under analysis here along with other manifestations of these — uh — visitations."

There are mutterings of discontent. "Cut the crap," says someone. "We know all this stuff," says another. The team leader stands dressed in a white lab coat at the front of the room to the side of Lindstrom's podium. She is a slim woman in her early thirties with gray-streaked hair and the grim, no-nonsense face of the experienced clinician. She frowns at her staff and holds a hand in front of her to wave them into silence.

Lindstrom continues: "Our newest alien," he waves his pointer at the screen, "is the first one to make a successful — uh — visit. I have personally debriefed him at length, and although I have formed some opinions about him

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and am impressed by the quality of his preparation for survival here, I have not been able to elicit any information bearing on his mission or intentions. Some four hours of tapes of that debriefing are now available to you for further analysis.

"Pending a determination by the court, we have the alien in custody and will convey him to the State Medical Facility in Vacaville, where he will be held on a warrant issued pursuant to the Alien and Immigration Act of 1957." There is a chorus of expletives. The frown and the hand again.

Lindstrom continues: "I know you had hoped that he be turned over to you today for further study, but that does not now appear possible until the judge has acted on one of nearly two dozen petitions of *habeas corpus*. Accordingly, I have been asked to provide the Extraterrestrial Task Force with this statement."

The room buzzes with anger. "What do you mean Vacaville?" says one bearded man. "How'd they get to the front of the line?"

"What do you mean *not possible*?" says another.

"What kind of cooperation?" asks the team leader in the white lab coat.

Lindstrom ignores the questions. He has been instructed to limit his comments. He clicks the switch in his left hand and the lights go up as the image on the screen disappears. He refers to a clipboard and says: "This concludes my formal report to you as ordered by Judge Matsuko pending the *habeas corpus* hearing on Monday next."

It is 10:30 on a sparkling Thursday morning. Lindstrom and Janet McCatters, who is Chief of the Criminal Division in the West Coast headquarters of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and Lindstrom's boss, walk the mile and a half across town from their offices on Sansome to the San Francisco Federal Building on Turk Street. Worried as usual about her weight, McCatters has persuaded Lindstrom to walk. "Besides, it'll give us a chance to discuss the Al case."

Lindstrom understands. Although INS has nominal responsibility for Al, the United States Attorney has the power, and that makes the Deputy U.S. Attorney on the case everybody's superior and McCatters wants to make sure Lindstrom knows the score. She cautions him as they walk up Market: "Word I get is Washington wants out of this business. Like all the way. They'd like someone — anyone — to get a *habeas* and take the guy off our hands."

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"Maybe," says Lindstrom, eyes locked straight ahead, "someone'd like to pry Al out of Turk Street even before we get him moved and that's why we got three guys doing an ABC tail on us."

McCatters, who is not without street experience, does not look back, does not search for reflections in store fronts. "After all that TV, they got you made," she says. "Could be another bureau or one of the networks or for God's sake the people from Disney or the Chinese or McCann Erickson or.... Who doesn't want to get their little paws on our guy?"

"Yeah. Whoever. It's big bucks for the Movie of the Week bunch and big reputations for all the cut-and-sew guys in the labs. I guess after yesterday I'm a celebrity, get my fifteen minutes of fame."

They pass a line of newspaper racks. "Third Alien Lands in East Bay," reads the *San Francisco Chronicle* headline. *USA Today*'s is "California's Mystery Alien: Army Mobilizes." *The Enquirer* promises an exclusive report on alien sex in San Francisco.

As they cross Powell, she says: "The three questions are, what's he here for and why such elaborate preparation and how much of a threat does he pose, that's one. Who's going to get first and maybe only crack at him, that's two. And three's what'll the ones who don't get to play do about it and who'll they do it to."

Lindstrom nods. "That's six questions, Janet. As to number one, whatever he's up to, there isn't much covert about it. He doesn't know why'n hell he's been so elaborately trained for what turned out to be a pretty public entrance. I think his mission's as big a mystery to him as it is to us, and unless he's the advance guy for the invasion of the body snatchers or carrying some kind of virus that turns us all into the killer tomatoes that eat Chicago, I'm damned if I can see much threat."

"Yeah, well, I guess I'll worry about the other questions," says McCatters. "It's C.Y.A. time and I don't want the Service to take the fall when everybody who owns a pint of printer's ink tells everybody else what the U.S.G. did wrong."

Lindstrom takes her arm as they skirt a noisy raghead protest at Taylor and Eddy. She does not object to his hand and what others might take as chauvinism, which is one reason why Lindstrom likes her, enjoys working with her.

"What I don't understand, Janet," he says, "is why you're so worried

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about weight. You look really fine to me." She is a substantial woman in her early-forties, big but not fat, a comer who has steadily progressed in the bureaucracy without excessive dishonesty. Lindstrom trusts her and she him.

"Thanks, Jake," she says. "You're probably just horny like the rest of the senior citizens I got working for me."

She stops at the dull gray entrance to the Federal Building and this time puts her hand on *his* arm. "Jake," she says quietly. "You know why you're on this case, don't you?"

"I'm not civil service?"

"Yeah. That, and you're a real short timer."

"Expendable?"

"If something goes wrong and we let the fuckers, yeah."

A secure elevator takes them up to a high ceilinged office in the Justice Department suite. Tall windows let cool morning light in to fight with the fluorescents.

They are perfunctorily greeted and seated by Arnie Goldschmidt, the Senior Deputy U.S. Attorney. He is a plump, pink man in his forties from Little Rock whose curly red hair and cherubic face belie what Lindstrom, who has worked with him before, has described to his wife as the loving kindness of a Great White. "Jesus God," Goldschmidt says in a quiet, conversational way, directing his attention to McCatters, "Lindstrom does himself proud on this one and now you want the whole goddamn U.S. Government to take a dive with the Ninth Circuit. I am no way gonna stand up on my hind legs in front of Skinner or Matsuko or whoever judge's got the duty and tell them the U.S. Attorney and the INS and the whole fucking Justice Department's gotten religion and been, you know, born again and now wants to fight *habeases* like a case of jock itch and keep custody of what's gotta be the biggest pain in the ass since the Madonna kidnapping hoax just because the arresting agent's afraid the alien's gonna get picked to pieces if we don't keep him bottled up somewhere."

Lindstrom can't help admiring Goldschmidt's use of language to express his power.

"You know's well as I do," the attorney continues, "that we got no real policy direction on this shit with the extraterrestrials. State Department's taken a bye and shipped the whole friggin' issue to the U.N. where it'll sit in

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the Security Council until I'm back in the hills breeding razorbacks, and Hopkins is a Truly Great Attorney General who all of us in the field admire to distraction but he hasn't got balls enough during the first senatorial election year in the 21st Century to stand up to the President and State and tell 'em this is not solely and exclusively an internal security problem for the U.S. and A., and so we and everybody else in the Department are by God stuck with your Al or Earl or whatever the fuck's 'is name until he's sprung on a *habeas* and gets the hell outta our hair, and as far as I'm concerned the only real question is who takes delivery and how fast can we get him there."

McCatters waves her hands in front of her blouse, palms down, as if pushing burning oil away from water she's abandoned ship into. "Come on, Arnie," she says. "I know's well's you do someone's going to eventually get our guy. But Lindstrom, we — Christ, the *service* — is just trying to get your office to slow down a little. The Pentagon's convinced Al's the 21st century equivalent of the yellow peril and screaming at the boss in Washington who is not even a little reluctant to let me know of his discomfort, and everybody in the goddamn intelligence community and NIH and NSF is hollering for a sample of this or a little piece of that. That bunch of media creeps in L.A. are going to court this morning to enjoin us for a press conference. Jeez, if I had two or three extraterrestrials I could saw 'em up into one ounce baggies and retire a rich woman. What is this, the third? And every time one of these guys shows up and even before we try to grab 'em they get sucked back into that goddamn disgusting thing that brings 'em and takes 'em away, and other than a little blood and skin frags from number one and all that goo from number two we've got shit to report to Defense or Langley or the project down in Palo Alto.

"We fully appreciate," she continues, looking to Lindstrom for confirmation and getting a nod, "that you only got eleven-oh-three to work with. You can't make an Enemy Alien case without a Hostile Power, you can't make Request for Asylum without Clear Endangerment, but any way you look at it, we don't get a judge to go along with a Hold for Deportation order and one of these outfits takes our guy out of custody, whoever gets him is going to be top dog and every other outfit is going to be after our ass for letting the one that got him, get him."

Now Goldschmidt is really enjoying his clout. "Forget it, Janet. This is my call and I'm calling it. I want this yahoo off our hands and out of Turk

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Street by close of business Friday and I don't want a ration of crap about it, either.

"Anyway," he says, supporting his delicious exercise of raw power with irrefutable logic, "If we had a Hold for Deportation, what the hell would you enter in Line 16, 'Nation of Origin'? Where you gonna deport him to?"

Janet is silent. The audience is over and they rise to leave. Lindstrom asks, "You got a surveillance order on me, counselor? On Al?"

"You nuts Lindstrom? You seeing things? If you've picked up an escort, it sure as hell ain't Justice's."

Lindstrom has no reason to believe or disbelieve the answer.

That night sleep evades Lindstrom, and because they have been married for thirty-five years and lovers for thirty-seven, it evades Jan, too. "This alien thing?" she says after a while of darkness in their small house in the Berkeley Hills.

"Yeah. But 'alien' doesn't sound right. This is an interesting young guy and probably more human than I am. Trained to a T. He's smart and funny and likable. Made me want to pet him like a puppy. Could have melted into the population without a hitch except he arrived like he was advance man for a Michael Jackson revival. God knows what he's here for. Maybe to subvert the republic or ravish our maidens or prepare us for conquest by rapacious hordes of bug-eyed monsters, but somehow I don't think so. I spent a whole afternoon with him, and he's a nifty young guy. Reminds me a lot of..." Lindstrom stops suddenly, once more at the precipice of grief, obeying their unvoiced agreement.

"It's okay," says Jan softly. "I know what you mean." They both regularly encounter young men about the age Tom would have been now, and even after ten years, neither can help thinking, Hey! You'd be my Tom if....

They are silent. The pain of loss dulls to loss remembered but never goes away, and a dead child is always a child. They embrace and kiss and separate. It is a time for loving, not love-making.

But the embrace cheers Lindstrom, pulls him from the passivity of regret into thinking and scheming, where he is happiest.

"Thing is, babe," he says, sitting up against the headboard and turning on the bedside lamp so that he can look into her pretty, lined face, "every scientist, politician, do-gooder, religious nut, and storm door salesman in the

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country is after the guy, not to mention producers for 500 cable and shopping channels. Any one of them can damage him. Together they'll tear him to pieces."

"How about Uncle Sugar?"

"The U.S.G.'s even worse. Hell, the bureaucrats don't want any part of him. He is a number one headache. Doesn't matter what Al's purposes are, if he has any. Whatever he does, someone's not going to like it and they'll blame the government for not preventing it. And whoever gets control of Al, whatever that custody agency does, they're going to piss off some other agency with powerful political friends."

"And so you're stuck."

"So far, yes. Know what Janet told me? We got Al because when they had that interagency conference after the second one didn't make it and slopped goo all over that Oakland dock and they were arguing over who was going to take on the press and Washington and all the little old ladies with blue hair, she lost the toss."

"*You* lost the toss."

"Yes, I guess so. But hell, I never even had the coin in my hand."

"Call in sick."

"Bug out, you mean." Lindstrom gives it some thought. "Yeah. If I had any sense I'd do that. Let someone else worry. One way or another, someone's going to get hung out to dry on this one, and a guy who's a couple of weeks from retirement and no Civil Service protection — whooee! I'm almost an unperson already."

Jan rolls up on her elbow to look into his face. "But you're not going to fade on this one, are you." It is a statement, not a question.

Lindstrom is slow to respond. After a moment he slides down beneath the covers, as if ready to burrow into sleep, and his voice is soft, muffled. "Can you believe us — me — worried about a goddamn pension? Where're the kids we were? Christ, we bought as much of the establishment as we could handle without yorking just so we could do something in civil rights. Now I feel pompous when I think about doing something just because it's — well — right!"

"If you start singing 'You and Me Babe' *I'm* going to york," says Jan.

Lindstrom surfaces. "You and me all right. You remember the Soviet defector we baby-sat in that rotten old farmhouse outside of Culpepper for a

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couple of months back in '68?"

"Yech! Boris the Ever-Erect Defector!"

"Well, if he's still alive he's probably still in custody somewhere and still industrial-strength horny. But I'm sure he went totally ape years ago. Remember how everybody wanted a piece of what they thought he knew? They locked him up with a bone key and threw it to the dogs and debriefed him six times a week. He was making up stuff to satisfy whatever agency was in town even when we did our hitch there, and every new case officer and Special Agent in the business cut his interrogation teeth on him. He maybe was a shit but I felt sorry for the guy. Imagine what'll happen to an Al; his secrets are probably in his body chemistry and internal organs." Lindstrom reaches up to turn off the bed lamp. "I can't let something like that happen to a — well — to Al."

"How do you know he isn't dangerous? Maybe he's got some kind of super powers you don't know anything about."

"Yeah. Well."

"Well?"

"Well, hell. He's just one guy in orange coveralls sitting in an isolation cell in Turk Street. He's no Superman and he hardly snuck into town. Whatever put him here sure made enough ruckus doing it. He called it 'mother' and said it was something like an insect laying eggs. So what's he going to do? Turn into a giant horsefly? Lead a revolution? End Western Civilization as we know it? Shit, I hope so. I'm ready."

"Hey, babe, take it easy. I just asked."

"Yeah, and you're right, of course. I gotta think about that, but I also have to, you know, do what seems right...." His voice trails off. Then: "What do you say, Jan. You ready for another adventure?"

"When did the last one end?"

She thinks back about Berkeley in 1965 and the civil rights movement and a dozen different safe houses and as many identities and the long tired time in the '80s when no cause seemed any better than any other cause, but one way or another they had taken a hand in almost anything that helped the losers of the world, despite — or maybe because of — Jake's employment. At least no kids to put into the equation now; Ellen grown and gone, and Tom....

"What do you have in mind?" she asks.

"I don't know. Something. Well, you know, with or without a pension,

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retirement looms. We gotta make some changes anyway...." Lindstrom is trying to convince himself as much as Jan.

"Sure, babe. I'm with you."

"Pack up the old kit?"

"First thing tomorrow."

They subside in a slow drowse into sleep. He does not worry Jan about the Chevy with government plates parked down the street, and she sleeps with an arm across his chest. But sleep continues to evade him because no plan he can formulate — at one A.M. anyway — seems feasible, and then his sense of the ridiculous kicks in and he dozes off comforted by the thought that he will probably once again be able, somehow, to improvise when the situation is right, and then he dreams of himself, pensionless and penniless, playing a concertina at the Powell Street cable car turntable, Al, chained, scampering among the tourists with a tin cup.

THE TEAM leader in the white lab coat at the ET-EF briefing is named Estelle Lemos. A physician and research geneticist, she has assigned herself to collect the more extensive secondary samples for the biochemical workup on the alien, and she has asked to accompany Lindstrom on Friday as he transports Al from Turk Street to the Vacaville Medical Facility. Her lab coat replaced by a belted red silk raincoat, she is quite pretty sitting on the passenger side of his motorpool '01 Plymouth with the custodial rear seat as he drives up the Peninsula on the Bayshore Freeway from Palo Alto. Lindstrom is surprised at her good looks. She had seemed thin lipped and hard, older somehow, at the ET-EF session.

"I appreciate your letting me ride along like this," she says. "I really want a good look at our specimen."

"Specimen?" Lindstrom is put off by the word.

Lemos notes this. "Sorry. That's the biochemist talking. Let's face it, most of us in the test tube and genome-mapping racket come to think of people as a sort of a pipe with sphincters at either end and a lot of auxiliary systems designed to fill it up and empty it at regular intervals. Occupational hazard."

Lindstrom nods as he takes the off ramp onto 7th. "And Al is a new kind of pipe?"

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"Sure. And frankly one we can examine a little more thoroughly than, well, usually."

"How so?"

"Well, we'll start with new blood and urine samples like I'm going to take this afternoon, and then a little tissue for biopsy, and then we'll get a blue sheet permitting in vivo surgical examination of an experimental animal...."

"What do you mean experimental animal?" Lindstrom interrupts.

"I know it sounds, well, crude and maybe unfeeling, and I wondered when you told us about the *habeas corpus* hearing. The word in the lab is that's just a holding action until our genome report is in on the first samples we took Tuesday night. It will show that your specimen is human only up to about the 99th percentile."

"Sure. So?" says Lindstrom. He slows a little for the turn onto Leavenworth.

"But that also means that your guy is something less than human, that he's, you know, somewhere in that last percentile. He's *different* from human and a couple of critical DNA sequences will prove it."

Lindstrom understands at least most of the implications of this. "Then the ACLU and all the other *habeas* petitioners are out of the picture," he says.

"Right," says Estelle Lemos. "Wrong *corpus*, and so you're out too and any other agency with authority over people. From now on it's the Department of Agriculture and the National Institutes for Health and the Research Protocol Committee for Experimental Animals at Stanford University and for all I know the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species."

She sees Lindstrom, eyes fixed on the rear of a truck ahead, shaking his head slowly as if to deny her words. "Hey," she says. "We're not going to butcher your Al or Earl. Just find out what makes him tick."

Lindstrom does not like what he is hearing. His worst fears lie in what Lemos is telling him. The system is going to make another victim.

As he pulls into the underground garage at the Turk Street facility, he says: "Maybe, Dr. Lemos— maybe you ought to wait and see Al for yourself." He is surprised at how his voice rises as he adds: "He is not, you know, some fucking hamster!"

Her mind is on the research plan she will be devising. "Oh, yes. Of course," she says absently.

She stays in the car as Lindstrom signs for Al, who greets him with smiles

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and chatter and a flood of good-natured questions. He once again reminds Lindstrom of a puppy, which — he realizes — is a bit true of most young men when they are not preoccupied with one of what stress psychologists refer to as the four F's — fight, flight, food, and eroticism.

Down in the garage, Lemos leaves the car long enough to stand and shake hands with Al, who is then confined in the rear seat, behind steel netting, as the three of them set off on I-80 across the Bay Bridge for Vacaville. Al is in fresh orange, this time bearing the letters "USM" for United States Marshal.

But he is suddenly, uncharacteristically mute. Something very strange is happening, and as Lindstrom wheels the car through the I-80 interchange and up the ramp onto the Bay Bridge, he tries to puzzle it out. His introduction of Al to Lemos in the underground garage produced what started as a perfunctory handshake but extended into a lingering one and an accompanying look of stunned bemusement in the two. He will later describe the moment to Jan as "like two people in one of those high-key photographs advertising perfume or designer jeans and me playing the idiot nightingale imported from London to give the scene some class."

He weighs his impression of the tough, vaguely cynical woman he has spoken with that morning against what now looks like a love-struck schoolgirl sitting beside him, her torso twisted under the seatbelt so that she can stare raptly back through the netting into one green eye and one blue eye staring just as fixedly at her. He first concludes that all young people — for him, anyone under, say, forty-five — are crazy, victims of their glands. But then he rejects the shallow, comic strip ease of that assessment and returns to worried uncertainty. He glances sidelong at Lemos but can read nothing in her profile but fierce concentration.

Lemos finds herself in emotional turmoil. She is stupidly, irrationally, foolishly, unequivocally in love or lust, she does not know which, with a strange less-than, more-than man and she cannot, either as a mature woman or a scientist, abide the excess of unreason it has so suddenly injected into her life. At the same time there is this soaring, exhilarating, overwhelming *rightness* to what she now thinks is coming her way.

The motorpool Plymouth soars across the Bay, suspended between the insubstantialities of sky and water, its 2.99 human beings equally suspended, each in his own intriguing purgatory of confusing emotions.

Oh my God, thinks Lemos, it must be pheromones or some-

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thing. But she rejects this.

And then, because she was recently on the cusp of recovery from a disappointing love affair, she thinks: rebound, that must be it. But she rejects this explanation too. She cannot take her eyes away from Al's.

"Jake," says Al, his ebullience softened into something almost like a whisper. "Something's happened. I think I got an idea about...." In the rearview mirror, Lindstrom can see that Al's gaze remains fixed on Lemos. "...the mission. I think maybe I know what I'm going to do here."

"Oh?" says Lindstrom. "I think I'm with you on that, Al." They are on the downgrade, approaching the Nimitz Interchange. Lindstrom is catching on, understanding, and he doesn't really need Al to explain.

Lemos, too, begins to realize that she is experiencing the alien's defining power, the remarkable capacity lying in that one percentile of difference, and that her profound erotic reaction explains his mission.

"Jesus Christ, Lindstrom," she gasps finally, suddenly aware that she has been holding her breath, "I — we've got to do something!"

"Yes," says Lindstrom, adding up his observations and seeing in Lemos's expression confirmation of his wild surmise. It is, he thinks, improvise time. "But are you game for what may be a pretty rough time? I mean for you personally?"

Lemos needs no further explanation. All is now clear. She is silent for a hundred heartbeats, almost until the approach to the University Avenue exit. Then, shudderingly, she says: "Yes."

Amid a chorus of horns and squealing brakes, Lindstrom cuts viciously across four lanes of traffic to the off ramp, neatly losing the gray van that had followed them across San Francisco Bay.

He says to Lemos: "What kind of stuff do you need to mix up something that'll pass for that goo they found on the Ferro Street pier? I'll give my wife a call."

He thinks: Ravish our maidens, eh? And he grins for the first time since Tuesday morning as he reaches for the car phone.

Because in Lindstrom's thirty-six years of government service, McCatters is one of only two or three fellow employees still alive he thoroughly trusts, he calls her via a 7-Eleven pay phone he has rigged temporarily for remote and tells her how and where they can meet, a place he can countersurveil.

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Absolute trust is beyond him.

They sit drinking espresso on a verandah at the Breakers in Santa Barbara, the surf boiling a hundred yards to the south in the morning sun. She finds Lindstrom almost unrecognizable. He looks twenty pounds heavier, although she realizes this is all clothing and strategic padding, and his hair is very long, a dun brown shot with streaks of gray. He walks with a limp, which — when she expresses concern — he explains is the result of half a plastic clothespin in the instep of his left shoe. She knows that any physical defect will crowd out other details in a description of him. It is early March, two months after the last alien landing and Al's subsequent disappearance during transport, six weeks since Lindstrom's retirement.

"Your checks coming through all right?" she asks.

"Yeah. God bless electronic deposit."

"I don't want to hassle you, but — you know — I get curious. Hell, I just wanted to know how you're doing."

Lindstrom sips his coffee. "People getting nosy?" he asks. "Anybody giving you a hard time?"

"Not really. I caught a lot of hell when Al took off, but it was mostly for show. The folks in ET-EF tried to find some link with that Dr. Lemos of theirs, but no one could come up with anything and I guess she's keeping in touch during her leave. The boss was tickled pink to be done with the whole thing and of course so's that asshole Goldschmidt. And there was enough of that goo around the site outside Vacaville where you reported you lost him that Arnie's been able to shrug and say a few unpleasant things to the media about all of us but more or less put the focus on the mysterious ways of aliens."

"Good."

"So what are you up to, Jake? You handling retirement okay?"

"Oh yeah. You know how it is. Working yourself and your family into a new identity is pretty much a full time job for the first couple of months. And then Jan and I are getting ready to be grandparents again."

"Your daughter? Ellen isn't it?"

"No. Our son Tom. I don't think you ever met him. It's his wife Estelle who's expecting and we're kinda looking after things while he's — uh — on the road." Lindstrom knows he is not fooling McCatters and that's okay. He owes her some truth in return for a lot of first-order protection.

McCatters, who has read and revised Lindstrom's full 201 file and knows

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about Tom's death ten years ago, knows what Lindstrom is up to, knows that there is risk to all of them. But because she has been long in law enforcement in an increasingly dysfunctional society and because she feels wearied by the status quo, and above all else because she trusts Lindstrom, she has altered the file to bring Tom to life again.

She nods. "You must be excited."

"Yeah. We're, like, pretty eager to see what she produces."

"I just bet you are," says McCatters.

"But that's not fair! She borrowed the generator last *night!"*

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

THE FIRE THIS TIME

SCIENCE was invented once, and only once.

This is a singularly striking fact of human history. There were many opportunities for science to emerge, in the sense that we know it — the reasonably dispassionate search for objective, checkable truths about the physical world. The Egyptians and Babylonians had lots of rule-of-thumb engineering and geometry. The Romans could build magnificently. The Chinese invented paper, gunpowder, rockets, the great sailing vessels of the Ming era.

Yet none devised the rather abstract rules which govern scientific discourse. No rival to Euclid's *Elements*. No deductive mathematics. No Chinese or Indian or African theorems or proofs before they learned from Euclid.

Indeed, truly modern science emerged only half a millennium ago. The term "science," from the Latin, "to know," is less than two centuries old. Before that science existed but was called "natural philosophy." Science as we know it came at the hands of William of Ockham, Francis Bacon, and then the great experimenters, Galileo and his contemporaries. The crowning jewel was the systematic, mathematical description of the most classically serene part of the world, celestial dynamics, by Newton.

They all built on the Greeks, who invented the basic idea of the method. Along the shore of that rough peninsula, over two thousand years ago, the methods of careful reasoning, always braced by consultation with the facts of the matter, evolved and won through.

Not that all Greeks held to it, of course. Aristotle lusted after the great intellectual leaps. He was impatient

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with facts and seldom checked his many assertions. Simple enough, one would think, to see if a heavy ball of the same size as a light one fell to earth at a different rate. But it was nearly two thousand years before Galileo looked to see, and found the truth.

I loved Greece and was immediately drawn to it. My first visit there led to an entire novel about Mycenean archeology, *Artifact*. I grew up on a warm sea's edge, and live in Laguna Beach, California now because I simply love the rub and scent of the sea. More, I admire the cutting clarity of the air — sharper than the Gulf coast where I grew up, but sharing a smell of brine and eternal organic consequence.

I sometimes think that the Greeks developed their Euclidean certainties, their sharp visions of cause and circumscribed effect, *because* they lived in an air of razor clarity. The dry, lucid accuracies of Athenian air may have kindled in the ancient mind some vision of a realm beyond the raw rub of the day, a province of the eternal which obeyed finer laws, more graceful dynamics.

I thought this particularly because I was preparing, in late October of 1993, the notes for a course in ethics which I would soon teach in the honors humanities program at the University of California, Irvine. (Usually ethics is strictly a matter for the humanists, but for the past five years I have served as the token scientist in the honors courses.) It struck me how strongly Plato believed in smooth certainties lying behind our rude world, the famous shadows on the cave wall analogy. Socrates believed in higher ethical laws, too, which men could but crudely glimpse and try to copy. Idealism emerged in the sharp air of civilization's morning.

Somehow that city-state of a quarter million population produced an immense flowering in art, literature, philosophy — and science. Many cultures yield up art, music, and higher thought generally. But only the Greeks put together science. I wondered why.

I saw the smoke as I went to my one PM lecture on a blustery Wednesday, October 27. The spire of oily black smoke was about seven miles inland, I judged, near the freeway, far from my home in Laguna Beach. Dry winds off the desert called the Santa Anas brought an eerie, skin-prickling apprehension to the sharp air.

By the time I had held forth on turbulence theory for an hour and a half, a dark cloud loomed across all the southern horizon. The brush fire

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had swept to the sea. On the telephone my wife Joan said the smell was already heavy and asked me to come home.

I tried to reach Laguna Beach by the Pacific Coast Highway, only to be turned back by a policeman at the campus edge. So I went south, looping the long way around, leaving the freeway and threading through surface streets. When I had bought my Mercedes 560 SL my son had deplored its excess power, quite ecologically unsound, and I had replied lightly that I wanted to "seize opportunities." Here was the chance: I cut through traffic, hoping to get ahead of the predictable wedge wanting the only access to town.

I failed, of course. Traffic was chaotic. I took two hours to reach Monarch Bay, the community immediately south of Laguna Beach. At Monarch Bay the police stopped everyone. Smoke glowered across the entire horizon now.

I left my car at 5:30 and hiked north, striking up a conversation with a man, Dave Adams, who was walking to his nearby home. I stopped there for a drink and heard that the high school had burned. Our house sits three hundred meters above the school. On the other hand, this was media wisdom, instantly discounted.

I went on, hitchhiking and walking the five miles to central Laguna by seven PM. Police were turning everyone back but the acrid flavor in the air alarmed me, and the dark clouds blowing thickly out to sea seemed to come from our hill. The police stopped me several times. I always retreated, then worked my way around to another street and went on.

I knew that Joan must have evacuated by then, but I had set out to come home and just kept at it, through the gathering pall. Maybe there was something I could do — fight the fire, water down the yard, rescue some precious memories...

On Wendt Street, near the high school, a police car came cruising down, herding the few homeowners left. I ducked behind a stone wall. "Get out of my driveway!" a man wearing a headphone radio shouted at me. He waved a pistol wildly — a part of me noted, *.32 revolver, finger on the trigger guard, probably knows how to handle it* — and I realized he perhaps mistook me for a looter. I ran behind the police car and down a street, following the narrow windings toward our hill. Night had fallen.

I sprinted on — excited, oblivious to choking smoke, sirens and hoarse cries. At the high school — untouched, of course — I met fire teams and more police. Chaos. Flames

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leapt from our hill, a steady popping roar. Homes exploded in orange as their roofs burst open. Yellows and reds traced out the dark discords of walls collapsing, brush crackling, cinders churning up in cyclonic winds, orange motes in a fountain of air — then falling, bright tumbling fireworks. Ash swept through the streets like gray snow. Above it all a cowl of black smoke poured out to sea.

I crossed the street and climbed up onto a high ledge and still could not see far enough up Mystic Canyon to make out our house. But all around it homes burned furiously. Our street, Skyline Drive, was a flaming artery both above and below our house.

A fire warden shouted at me to get out. I hesitated, he shouted again, and I realized it was all over. At last I gave up our house and turned away. I had been rushing forward for several hours, intent on reaching home. That was impossible. I could do nothing in this inferno. I had not gotten in anybody's way, but I hadn't done any good, either. Working my way this close to the fires was risky, if only from the smoke I inhaled. Slowly I realized that I had been running on automatic, and all this was quite foolish.

I retreated through deserted streets. I hitchhiked partway back out and a few miles south found a 7-Eleven open. An incongrous sight, bright beacon beside the exodus. I was parched, sagging. I went in and straight to the back to get a big container of cold tea.

The store owner was in a heated argument with two men who wanted to get gasoline. Police had come by and ordered the pumps closed. Excited, the owner started rattling off Korean and one of the men grabbed him by the shirt collar and pulled him halfway across the counter. More shouting. The owner got free and backed away and the rest of us in the store yelled at the two men. They swore at the owner but made no more moves.

Plenty of talk then, accusations and retorts and barks of angry egos. I judged it was not going to get any worse so I left money on the counter and walked out with the tea. A block further south six motorcycle police from Newport Beach sat on their machines and watched people still leaving along the Coast Highway, their uniforms pressed and neat. They weren't interested in the 7-Eleven.

I finished the tea before I reached the Adams home. They all watched the television news and I drank some more. My thirst would not go away. I sat and listened to the announcer declare that all homes in the Mystic

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Hills were lost. All. Confirmation sent me into a daze.

I called friends, who reported that Joan had indeed evacuated town and come to them, and then went on to the refugee center. Dave Adams drove me to the center and I found Joan. She was in better shape mentally and physically than I. I sat on a curb and ate my first fast food burger ever, from a free canteen run by In 'n Out. It was improbably delicious.

Joan had evacuated as flames marched over the ridge line of the hill across the street, coming as fast as a person walks. She had stuffed her Volvo with financial documents, vital but small items like safety deposit keys, passports and telephone directories, plus our photo albums, the oldest of our Japanese woodblock prints, jewelry, and cherished oddments of our accumulated history.

She had been putting the pets in the car when a guy walked up and asked if she needed help loading things in the car. She suspected he was in fact interested in getting into the house, so said no thanks. He ambled away. Just as she was ready to slam the trunk closed, our postman pulled up, looking rather anxious. She took the day's mail, jumped into the car, and headed downhill. People were barreling down at high speed. The postman followed her out, stopping to deliver to homes which were soon to burn, flames approaching behind him. At the time, she said, it did not occur to her to laugh. Later, she did.

A police chaplain came by and we talked about losing the house. I couldn't seem to get my mind around the concept. We were leaving the center to go back to the friends when a neighbor called to us. He had lost his house, his classic car collection included. But he had seen our house standing at nine PM, he was pretty sure. It was hard to tell in the darkness, though, without street lights. This heartened us greatly but I had severe doubts that anything could have survived the furnace I had seen.

We reached friends, an Episcopal minister and wife, at midnight. We slept solidly until six PM. Up, talk, news on TV — which I found oddly uninteresting, and distrusted. Breakfast out. I always eat a lot in the morning, having grown up in farm country, and this time ordered double. The restaurant seemed eerie in its calm. Pancakes and omelettes, the fire only a rank smell from distant hills.

Back to the center, where we wore away the day vainly seeking news. Nobody released any information on homes burned. News pro-

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grams dwelt infuriatingly on the spectacular wasteland at the top of our hill, never letting the helicopter camera angle descend to take in lower Skyline Drive. Reports continued that everything had burned on Skyline. I was inclined to believe them, though I kept saying encouraging things to all I talked to, including our daughter Alyson, by cellular phones supplied free. I distracted myself by searching for clothes in the immense piles donated by charitable groups. I was still wearing the shorts and short-sleeved shirt I had been lecturing in, what seemed a year ago.

At four PM word came that since all fires were out we could go back into town. We left, I picked up my car, and we edged our way into Laguna. Behind me, out of my sight, Joan's Volvo overheated, stranding her for nearly two hours on Coast Highway.

Dusk fell as I reached the high school again, only to be blocked by police. Nobody allowed on the hill. Nope, not even residents. They were trying to prevent looting. Grim warnings.

I simply could not turn back. This was my neighborhood and I knew the short cuts. I slipped around the police lines, over ash-covered tennis courts, along a path and up through several burned homes, on to Skyline. Several news teams were arrayed among the ruins with portable gear, shooting interviews under their bright lights. Media okay, but homeowners keep out.

Melted cars and ashy gray debris littered Skyline. Cables down, charred palm trees. A heavy acrid stench made me cough. I walked uphill and around a curve. Amid the black ruins our house stood untouched. I approached in a daze. The battle to save it was visible only in fire hoses left in the street, boot prints in the yard and minor damage to plants.

Two doors were unlocked, one ajar. Inside, the smoky stink could not blanket my immediate reaction: home. Safe. Numbly I collected some floppy disk backups from my study. Pointless, but automatic. Our fireproof safe stood with both drawers yawning open. I took it all in but wasn't thinking much.

I departed in the gathering gloom. The street outside was covered with ash and burnt scraps. Somehow I didn't want to leave the hill, even in the gloom. I could not comprehend the enormity of others' loss, and of our luck. A German TV crew interviewed me when they found I could speak German. Crisis surrealism; a foreign tongue that recalled war zone damage.

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Still dazed, I wondered where Joan was. Turned out she had been exhausted by the overheated car and traffic, and stopped at a friend's. She was quite wrung out. We finally linked up again and spent the night at a nearby friend's house. The next day, Friday, we even got into our house. About eighty percent of the neighborhood was gone, 199 homes, probably $200 million lost. In the whole town over 350 burned, with losses around $500 million.

The water had run out again and again through the long fight. Firemen had been forced to abandon whole blocks to the swift flames. Around our group of a dozen homes they had drawn a perimeter and defended, using the hydrant across the street from us, which had high pressure. They worked around the houses, trampled vegetation, got the job done. The flames had come down our hill and the firefighters had stopped them at the curb across the street from our house.

Then the fire worked south, burning all the homes downhill from us, and leaped Skyline. It burned a dozen more homes below and then crawled up our canyon to within thirty meters of our house. The firemen hit the flames with a 500 gallon-per-minute, precision high-velocity cannon. After several hours that did it. Our canyon was a black pit.

Apparently the initial small fire far inland was set by someone, the media said. I didn't care much for these larger views; my focus had narrowed to the local, intense present. Time to clean up. Our unlocked doors apparently were the firemen's work, checking for people unable to get out. Joan had left our safe closed, but not locked. A looter had come through and checked it, finding only financial papers. He took nothing. That must have been while the police cordon kept out homeowners, but not entrepreneurs ready for the quick take.

Wildlife had suffered enormously. Dead birds littered the canyon. In the hills beyond a walk through the black slopes came to a twisted wire fence. Against it was a line of white bones, the lizards and rabbits and snakes and rats and deer that had run in blind panic into it and turned to face the onrushing wall of heat.

I trapped a two-pound rat in our tool shed, and saw rats the size of cats jumping between palm trees. From our deck we watched hawks diving at mice as they scampered for shelter on the bare hillsides. We put out seed and water and birds flocked — gnatcatchers, hummingbirds, red-tailed hawks, crows, brilliantly hued mountain bluebirds.

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Two Dalmatians were found roaming, having somehow escaped their burning house. Boaters three miles offshore saw an exhausted mule deer doe swimming out to sea, away from the blighted canyons where she usually foraged. They hauled her in and brought her back for care. On the canyons, gray tree frogs turned spontaneously black, closely matching the charred ground. Somewhere in their genes lies the memory of many other fires, and a honed response to give them protection from predators, somehow triggered by the sight or smell of the flames.

All this seemed very distant, in the immense relief at being among the survivors. Our house was not particularly expensive, but what really matters, I came to feel, was how much of yourself you had put into your home. Neighbors recently moved in walked away from their ruins with apparently some aplomb. Oldtimers were more devastated.

We both slept poorly for several nights, chased by phantom flames in repeating dream dramas. Those who had lost everything were forlorn, adrift. When the Santa Ana winds picked up again, one woman who had been evacuated in the fire began automatically loading her car with cherished photographs. Some elderly couples developed the habit of taking their dearest possessions with them everywhere they went.

Counselors at the Community Clinic spoke of "post traumatic stress disorder" and of conducting "critical incident stress debriefings" but the phenomena they tried to capture with such jargon was real. I kept going over how close it had been, with the unsettled mind of one who has been shot at and barely missed.

As a scientist I habitually saw cause and effect, but the random nature of the world had asserted itself here. Much of our culture devotes itself obsessively to the comfy human world, our gossip and relationships and destinies. Now we had all been reminded that the world itself neither likes nor dislikes us; worse, in a way, it is indifferent. The fire had no point, no target in itself — though whoever started it probably did. However much I believed as a scientist in an objective, unconcerned universe out there, which we study to understand, my emotions veered away from that.

The calamity had missed us by a hair. We had fireproofed the roof with concrete tile five years before, recoated with thick fire-resistant paint in 1992, and the morning of the fire had a garden crew clearing out the volatile underbrush. They had fled only when the flames danced

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above the ridgeline, just behind Joan. We had been prepared, sure, but we were hugely lucky, too.

We had already been through the slide and burning in our little canyon in January 1993, which took out the three homes immediately below us. The immensely larger ferocity of this catastrophe was numbing. A week later, a sudden rain flooded out the five surviving homes across the street. Sandbags in our driveway deflected the ash-laden streams from us. The big storms of winter were worse.

I missed no classes and got back to research soon. But my thinking was unsettled and in reading Plato I found a curious dislocation.

An unbroken tradition stretches from Pythagoras and his theorems to Copernicus and his planetary circles. But for most of the 1300 years between them, astrology dominated civilization's attitude toward the heavens. Astrology takes a more warm, comfy view of the sky, makes it human-centered.

Greek geometry and deductive thought were unique inventions, never duplicated by other cultures. The very notion that the cosmos is ultimately open to reason comes naturally only to minds who see how general deductive reasoning is. Greek patterns of thinking barely escaped the turmoil of intervening millennia, and if lost would probably never have been reinvented.

Did Euclidean certainties come in part from an unconscious association with the clarity of air and sea and crisp, dry land? I had noted the similar feel to California and Greece, and to the Egyptian city of Alexandria, where Euclid wrote his *Elements*. Did they see sharp visions of cause and effect because they lived in air of razor clarity? Did it hint of a realm beyond the clutter of detail, accident, emotion? In a pristine world it is easier to imagine a province of the eternal which obeyed finer, more lofty and graceful laws.

The fire impressed me with the sheer raw power of nature. It disoriented my thinking and made difficult a return to the calculations I was doing in turbulence theory. Some part of me could not settle down to the neat, clean equations, precise markings for exact quantities; the world outside was too rife with emotion, friction, brutal forces, malicious intent. The universe seemed to be threatening, not standing at an abstract distance.

If science was such an unlikely event, one time only, perhaps we should be more mindful that its habits of mind persist in our own time. We cannot rely on clear air to insure

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our trust in abstract reasoning.

Further, think of the assumptions behind the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. Will intelligent life develop deductive reasoning? And then build radios? If it was a singular event for us, how might the raw edge of alien environments blot out those analytical habits which have led us up from darkness? Unsettling thoughts.

There is great relief in this aftermath, of course. Still, sometimes it felt as if the world would keep trying until it got us. I suppose in a way it will.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: molsen@vmsa.oac.uci.edu

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Daniel Marcus is a graduate of Clarion West 1992 (which he attended with Mark Bourne). In addition to F&SF, *his short fiction has sold to* Asimov's *and the mainstream journal* Witness. *He has a music degree, but he currently works as an applied mathematician at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.*

"Winter Rules" is an odd sf story that manages to combine virtual reality, golf, blackjack and nuclear war.

Winter Rules

By Daniel Marcus

I WAS WALKING THROUGH the lobby toward the gambling tables and I noticed that some of the letters had fallen off the sign near the registration desk.

BALLY'S RENO WELCOME EROS ACE S IENCE NSTITUT F AMERICA

Eros Aces. Not bad. It could have been the name of a sleazy lounge band at one of the brothels on the edge of town. Reno is a cross between Disneyland and Gomorrah — a living shrine to every obsessive-compulsive character disorder known to *Homo americanus.* A few of us had been pushing to get the conference site changed — New Orleans maybe, even Houston — but money had changed hands in some smoky board room somewhere, and we were hooked into "The Biggest Little City in the World" for another two years. It wasn't all bad. I liked hanging around late at night in the card room near the main entrance. One to three poker, pretty relaxed, and it was a perfect vantage point for watching the nation's top aerospace executives filter in from their night on the town. You could tell the ones who had been out

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to the Mustang Ranch. They scuttled across the lobby like great, blue-suited crabs, heads down, hands stiffly at their sides, projecting a studied air of intense concentration, like they were preparing for that big presentation tomorrow. What they were *really* thinking was probably more like, How am I going to act normal with June, Wally, and the Beaver when I get back to Mayfield?

I sat down at one of the five-dollar blackjack tables, gave the dealer a fifty-dollar bill, and she gave me ten red chips. There were two other men at the table, both from the conference. They were still wearing their name tags, clipped to the lapels of identical charcoal-gray suits. General Dynamics. I almost laughed out loud. Back at Berkeley, whenever they did a recruiting pitch on campus, we'd make up hundreds of posters and plaster them all over the place. It was a picture of a mushroom cloud. Above the picture — GENERAL DEMONICS, and below — ARMAGEDDON. WHY NOT MAKE A CAREER OUT OF IT? There was always some angry looking suit with an ice scraper stalking from one poster to the next, ripping down what he could. We'd follow about fifty feet behind him, putting up new ones.

I put a chip in the circle inscribed on the felt in front of me and the dealer dealt out two cards to each of us. I looked at my hand. An ace and a ten. Blackjack. I flipped my cards over and the dealer gave me a red chip, two silvers, and a fifty-cent piece.

"That was my blackjack!" the suit next to me said.

"You an engineer?" I asked.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Well, you're no physicist."

He looked confused, opened his mouth, then shook his head and looked down at his hand. Fifteen. The dealer was showing a king.

"You gotta hit that," I said.

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

He hit, busted, his friend hit, busted, and the dealer flipped a seven. They both glared at me. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders. It went on like that for a while; me, winning slightly more often than not, the two of them getting completely hosed almost every time. After a few more hands, they gathered up their remaining chips and stalked off

"You from around here?" the dealer asked me. There was a black plastic badge clipped to her white shirt that said she was Darlene from Barstow.

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Something about the way she carried herself told me that it had been a long time since Barstow, and that she had been around the block once or twice since then.

"No, Santa Fe. I'm here for the conference."

She raised her eyebrows. "You seem sorta different."

"Thanks," I said. "I guess."

She dealt me another blackjack and paid me off.

"Dan?" I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned around. Dave Lemer. It took me a second to recognize him in the uniform — neat haircut, Italian wool pinstripe. I stood up and we embraced. I hadn't seen him since grad school. Last I heard he was at Hughes Aircraft. I fingered the lapel of his suit.

"Jesus, you too?" I asked.

"Yeah, well, I'm glad to see you're still flying the flag of the People's Republic of Berkeley," he said, taking in the rumpled corduroy jacket, the beard, the earring.

"How are things at Huge Aircrash?"

"Not too bad. They made me a group leader about six months ago, so there's a lot of management ratshit and not enough technical work, but that's about par for the course."

"Sandy still at Caltech?"

"Oh yeah. Tenure track — it's like feeding time in the shark tank at the aquarium. We have dinner together about once a week. I think she wears her hair differently now, but I'm not sure."

I laughed. "I was going to ask how's married life, but I guess I know."

"We're doing pretty well, actually. Bought a house."

"Wow. You guys go down to Orchard Supply on Saturdays and look at lawnmowers? You gotta get a Toro..."

"No, we ripped out the lawn and put in a rock garden. Nice smooth stones, little bonsai trees. The neighbors freaked. They actually had a block meeting — we're getting the silent treatment right now. It's pretty funny."

I laughed again, remembering the apartment he had had in grad school. Two basement rooms in the shadow of a larger building, so there was never any sun. It was on Telegraph, right next door to a martial arts school. All day long you heard the screams, the sound of bodies slamming into the mats.

"You're at Los Alamos, right?" he asked. "I remember you had a few offers...."

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"Yeah, an applied math group. Algorithm development for Navier-Stokes equations. Projection methods with some new wrinkles. We do special, um — stuff — for the nonlinear advective terms."

"Stuff?"

"Stuff. It's a technical term. Unbelievable resolution. We're just starting to get some recognition out in the community, but that's kind of a mixed thing. Remember Olaf?"

He laughed. "Who ever forgets Olaf? I haven't seen him since that asymptotics seminar. How's he doing?"

"I think he was about to get arrested for impersonating a scientist, so they made him a bureaucrat. N.D.A."

"N.D.A?"

"Nuclear Deterrence Agency. He saw a simulation I did of convection cells in storm clouds and got a tent in his pants you wouldn't believe. Wanted to see if I could adapt it to fireball rise, dust entrainment, that sort of thing."

"Jesus, that's some scary shit."

"Yeah, those loopy motherfuckers still think the Cold War's going on. I asked him if he wanted me to name the density array for the dust component Moscow or Kiev. 'Those are integer declarations,' he says. What an asshole."

"You gambling?" Darlene asked.

I nodded and she dealt out the cards. I got a seven and a four — a double down hand. Darlene was showing a six. I flipped my cards, added three chips to the three already up, and she gave me another card, tucking it face-down under the pile of chips. I peeked under the edge — a seven. Still alive. Darlene flipped a jack, and dealt a four from the top of the deck. Twenty. She swept up my cards and chips in a single fluid motion, making a clucking sound with her tongue.

"Tough break," Dave said. "You gonna do the calculations?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know. He wants to give us a couple hundred K. We need the scratch to keep the other programs alive, but I don't like dealing with those people. I don't know."

"Funding's pretty tight right now."

"Yeah, the big peace scare. It's like you picked up an ant farm, shook it up, and put it back down again. Everybody's wondering what's going to get cut out from under them next. The level of cynicism is pretty high."

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Darlene dealt me a jack and a ten. I showed it to Dave and elbowed him in the ribs. She dealt herself a king and flipped her hole card. Ace. "God damn it," I said. Darlene shook her head, smiling.

"You're not very good at this," Dave said.

"I was doing fine until you showed up...."

"You were talking about a level of cynicism," he said, smiling.

"Yeah," I said. "It's especially funky in Comp Physics. We sort of do a dual function. One is leading edge research, blue sky stuff, that's my group. The other is, um — service — to the other divisions. If you'll pardon the expression."

"Maintaining bomb codes."

"Very astute. So things could go one of two ways in the next few years. Get some people with vision and courage, aggressively pursue outside funding, and start to shift the primary focus of the labs away from the military-industrial circle jerk..."

"...or you can bend over and hand the bomb geeks a jar of Vaseline."

"Exactly."

A couple of other players sat down. Darlene made change and started shuffling up a new deck.

"You talking or gambling?" she asked me again. "Drive it or park it." She was smiling, her tone not unfriendly.

"Talking, I guess." I gathered up my chips. "Take it easy, Darlene."

"C'mon, deal already," one of the players said. "You're gonna wear off the numbers." The smile disappeared and she went back to work.

"You still play golf?" Dave asked me.

"Jesus, not for a long time. Why?"

"You're not gonna believe this. Follow me."

We made our way through the maze of slot machines and gambling tables. There was an atmosphere of barely controlled pandemonium in the place — flashing lights, ringing bells, a constant murmur of voices, shouts raised in victory and disappointment. At the far end of the casino stood a hologram of Barry Manilow, fifteen feet high, grinning like a fool. There was probably enough collagen in his face to smooth out the Himalayas. Marquee-style wraparound lettering floated in a circle above his head, like a halo, announcing show times. "Persistent vegetative state," I muttered.

"Huh?"

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"It's a medical term..." I said. "Never mind."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You see any good talks yet?" he asked.

"Not really," I said. "The abstracts are supposed to be refereed but that's kind of a joke. This is really a schmoozing conference for me anyway, see who's doing what, find out where the bodies are buried. Besides, it really cuts into the gambling."

Just ahead, a fat woman in a purple wig and a shapeless green polyester shift began screaming. A river of plastic Nixon dollars poured from the snout of the slot machine in front of her and she jammed a cardboard bucket underneath it to catch the flow.

"You're giving one tomorrow, aren't you?" Dave asked, raising his voice above the din. "I thought I saw your name on the program."

"Yeah, but I can't go to it," I shouted back.

"What?" Dave asked.

I shook my head. "It's in a classified session and my clearance hasn't come through yet."

He chuckled. "I'll let you know how it turns out," he said.

"I appreciate that."

I turned to look at the woman as we walked past. The flow of dollars had stopped. She leaned against the machine, panting, her arms wrapped around its black, shiny sides. Twin patches of red stood out on her cheeks. I looked at her eyes and I had to look away.

We took an escalator downstairs, walked past a bowling alley and an arcade of cheesy little boutiques, rounded a corner, and there it was. BALLY'S RENO VIRTUAL GOLF, the sign read.

"You gotta be kidding," I said.

"No," he said. "This is great. I played yesterday."

We went inside. There were about ten wide booths, equally spaced around the perimeter of the room. The far end of each booth consisted of a screen, onto which was projected from the rear a picture of a lush, green fairway. Half of the booths were occupied and most of the people were dressed for golf — baggy purple, blue, or salmon trousers, polyester knit shirts. They wore large, bulky helmets that covered their heads entirely. Wires trailed from the helmets to a console on the wall of the booth. They stood on raggy patches of Astroturf, slamming golf balls into the screens. I walked over and stood behind one of the booths. The guy was just teeing off. He assumed the

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position, shifted his weight, wiggled his hips once, and swung. He connected nicely; the ball hit the canvas with a solid slap and fell to the floor. He just stood there. I could see the movement of his headgear tracing the trajectory of an imaginary golf ball. Suddenly, he stomped his foot. "Shit!" he said, his voice muffled by the helmet.

"There's something vaguely autoerotic about this," I said to Dave.

"Whatever you say, Dan. You wanna try it?"

"Sure..."

We walked over to the "Pro Shop," a counter manned by a pimply-faced adolescent in a "Bally's Reno Virtual Golf" sweatshirt. There were more shirts on the wall behind him, in a sort of semaphore-sign display, and an assortment of gold clubs, woods and irons arranged in overlapping fans.

"Set us up," I said.

"Okay, you want Spyglass Hill, Pebble Beach, or Cypress Creek?"

I looked at Dave and shrugged.

"I don't know," I said. "Pebble Beach, I guess."

"Good choice," the kid said. "That's our best course."

I thought he was trying to be funny, but he wasn't smiling. He gave us a set of clubs, a bucket of balls, and led us to an empty booth. He made an elaborate show of logging in to the console.

"You ever do this before?" he asked.

"I played Spyglass Hill yesterday," Dave said.

"Okay, so you know what to do. Good luck."

"Wait a minute," I said. "This is all simulation, right?"

The kid nodded, looking at me suspiciously.

"Then what's with the balls and clubs? Why bother?"

The kid took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"The — uh — kinesthetic experience is enhanced by the — uh — "

It was a stock answer and the kid clearly hadn't learned his lines. Imagine President Quayle lecturing on quantum field theory. I patted him on the shoulder. "Never mind," I said. "Don't worry about it."

He looked relieved. He placed the helmet on Dave's head and flicked a couple of toggle switches on its side. Then he did me. I closed my eyes as he lowered the helmet over my head.

I opened my eyes and I was — there. The illusion was perfect. The emerald green of the fairway was so bright it seemed to fluoresce in the

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midday sun. A few lazy clouds drifted across a sky of brilliant blue. Off to the right, the fairway was bounded by a sheer drop to the ocean. A seagull skimmed above the surf and I could hear its sharp, distant call. I looked over at Dave. He was wearing baggy orange trousers and a lime-green polo shirt. His eyes were shaded by a blue visor the size of a Frisbee.

"Nice outfit," I said.

"You should take a look at yourself," he said. I looked down. Plaid knickers. Argyle socks. Black and white wingtips. Christ on rollerskates.

The first hole was a par four, dogleg left. Ocean to the right of the fairway and dense woods all along the left. Dave went first. He made it look easy. With a graceful, unhurried swing he sent the simulacrum golf ball sailing into the clear blue. A display flashed in the lower right corner of my field of vision. Two-sixty out and ten to the left of center. Not bad.

I hadn't even *thought* about golf for over five years, but my body seemed to remember. I walked up to the tee and took my stance. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for a minute, trying to concentrate and relax at the same time. I opened them in time to see a large seagull swoop down and pick the golf ball off the tee in its curved, yellow beak. It headed straight as an arrow down the middle of the fairway and dropped the ball about two hundred fifty yards out.

Dave looked at me with a disgusted expression on his face. "Will you quit fucking around and play golf?" he said.

"Jesus, did I do that?" I asked. "Sorry."

"This system is very literal-minded," he said. "If you don't concentrate, it translates small, involuntary movements of the muscles in your face and neck into visual imagery." He frowned. "They're doing research on just how all that connects with your unconscious. I'm skeptical about that, but it can be pretty trippy sometimes. Anyway, I'll let you have this one. Call it a mulligan." He snapped his fingers and we were out in the middle of the fairway next to our tee shots. "You're away," he said.

"Wow," I said, looking around. "Beats walking."

We were about a hundred and fifty yards out from the green. I selected a six iron, walked up to the ball, exhaled, wiggled my hips and let fly. The heel of the club caught the ball a glancing blow and it spun off into the woods. The readout displayed 110 YARDS 60 LEFT — IN THE ROUGH. The last phrase flashed on and off at about two beats per second.

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"Fuck me," I said. "Fuck my dog."

Dave looked over at me like he wanted to say something.

I sighed. "I know, I know. Keep my head down. Left arm straight."

He shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I just never would've thought you'd wind up at a shop like Los Alamos."

I paused for a minute, mentally shifting gears. I had a sharp sense of dislocation, like I had suddenly lost all points of reference. Was this conversation real? Where was I? I looked around at the bright green fairway, felt the breeze from the ocean ruffle my hair, smelled the salt tang it brought.

What the hell, I thought. "I know what you mean," I said finally, nodding. "Trying to do mainstream science at the national labs can be pretty weird. It's not clear if we serve as a moderating influence to balance the weapons programs, or if we just legitimize that stuff by setting a good P.R. example." I shook my head. "There's an interesting sociology between the two factions, though. We think the weapons people are amoral scum and not particularly bright and they think we're dilettantes and parasites."

"You're probably both right," he said, smiling.

"Thanks a lot," I said. "We've got a good group, though, and we're doing some of the sexiest stuff that's being done in computational physics *anywhere*. I don't know if the work would exist without the infrastructure of the labs, and the work's just too important. It goes way beyond what piss-ant little bean counters like Olaf have in mind."

A cloud passed in front of the sun and I shivered with the sudden chill.

"Meanwhile, you have to sleep at night," he said.

"Yeah, that's it. You try to call things case by case and keep good boundaries. Hughes gets a lot of military contracts. What do *you* do?"

"Well, my situation is kind of like yours. My group does spacecraft design, thermal analysis. Recon satellites mostly, so the applications cut both ways."

"Malignant and benign."

"Yeah. So what do you do? I don't know...you do the right thing."

As we were talking he had been sizing up his shot. He pulled back the club and swung. There was the whoosh of displaced air, the soft click of compression and release as the club met the ball and followed through.

"You're pretty good at this."

"Yeah, well..."

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"Hey, how did you do that before — "

"You mean this?" He snapped his fingers and we were in the woods. "You're away," he said. My ball lay on a soft carpet of pine needles. The sun made a stippled pattern of gold and shadow through the trees.

"Jesus Christ, I'm in Sherwood Forest. Where's the green?"

"Just off to the right there through the trees. See the flag?"

I could just make out a tiny flash of red where he was pointing.

"I'm gonna have to chip out onto the fairway..."

"No, just blast right through. The simulation's pretty stupid about trees. You'll be fine."

I approached the ball, breathed in slowly, then out, pulled the club back and swung, remembering to keep my head down and follow through. I missed it completely.

"Nice practice swing," Dave said.

"Thanks a lot, shithead. Shut up and let me concentrate."

"It's a Zen kind of thing, Dan. Be the ball."

WHEN I GOT back to my room, there was a message on the vidphone. Short, not particularly sweet. "Dan, Olaf. Call me." There was no visual.

That was pretty much his style. He was a strange one, all right. Second-generation Soviet emigré. Not a great physicist, but he had the political acumen of a barracuda and he rose quickly in the ranks of the D.O.D. techno-sleazeball food chain. He was always into something murky, the kind of guy you figured must have racked up a lot of Frequent Flyer miles on Southern Air Transport during the eighties. It was rumored that he once gave an AK-47 to a colleague as a wedding present.

I knew what he wanted. He still had a hard-on for my codes and lots more taxpayer dollars than he knew what to do with. And he loved explosions. Particularly thermonuclear explosions. Since he couldn't make them for real anymore, not even underground since the Comprehensive Test Ban went into effect, he figured simulation was the next best thing.

I didn't want to deal with him just then. I patched my palmtop to the vidphone, got a pipe open to the Cube at Los Alamos, and tried to get some work done. I was studying the eigenvalue spectrum of the Taylor-Goldstein equation, trying to develop a new methodology for examining the stability of

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a particular class of fluid flows. An eigenvalue is a number that tells you something about how a system responds when you disturb its equilibrium. The discretized Taylor-Goldstein system yields hundreds of them, only one of which corresponded to the situation of interest.

Eigenvalue spectrum. Taylor-Goldstein equation. I said the words aloud, feeling their shape and weight on my tongue. It felt important to contextualize them somehow, to give them meaning and substance apart from abstract self-consistency. It is a political act, the naming of a thing.

The work went poorly; I was just skating on the surface of the mathematics, blind to the wholeness of it. I kept making stupid mistakes that got through the compiler somehow and showed up at run time as mysterious error messages. After two hours I decided to bag it, logged off, and went to bed.

I woke up early the next morning and went down to the breakfast buffet. The casino was still open, of course, but it was nearly empty, and without the white-noise background sound of human voices and the random Brownian-like movement of bodies crowded around the gambling tables, the glitz seemed hollow and frayed around the edges. As I walked past the blackjack tables I noticed that there were worn spots in the carpet, and the ad-holos had a high-frequency flicker that hurt my eyes.

I entered the buffet room and loaded up my plate with fruit, avoiding the steam table trays of pressed soybacon and stacks of leathery flapjacks. I found a table off in the corner of the room. I didn't want to talk to anybody. The previous day's conversation with Dave was playing itself over in my head, and the call from Olaf was sitting on my consciousness like a weight. I felt like I needed some quiet time to let it all percolate. So I sat there, sipping weak coffee and nibbling on pieces of melon, watching the room fill up as the conference attendees drifted down from their rooms. I saw a few people I knew, but just nodded, and nobody came to join me.

If I was expecting some sort of revelation, I was disappointed. I couldn't concentrate on anything for very long. My mind drifted to the talk I was supposed to give later that day, skittered over to a new card-counting strategy I had simulated on my palmtop but hadn't tried yet in the casino. Before I knew it it was time to hit the sessions. The first one I planned to attend was called "Physics of High-Temperature Hydrodynamics."

When I got to the auditorium the session was just starting. There was

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a man standing at the podium in front of the room. He looked vaguely familiar, and I realized I had seen him on television on several occasions — a famous astrophysicist. He also enjoyed, I recalled, a somewhat less public career as one of the country's leading designers of advanced thermonuclear devices. He was a few years older than I and seemed to have a relaxed, accessible air about him. I could imagine him working in his garage, playing with his children, taking long, quiet walks with his wife. He went through some preliminaries and began the lecture.

"Let's start with a model problem. We have a block of aluminum, room temperature, and we suddenly raise its energy to two kilovolts by some nearby...um...event."

There was a chorus of laughter from the audience. I did a quick mental calculation and realized that this corresponded to temperatures one might find in the interior of the sun.

"So what happens? First of all, before we go any farther, let me just say, particularly for those of you without security clearances, that this in no way corresponds to any specific...um...*scenario.* This is strictly an academic exercise. So what happens?"

There was another chorus of laughter, and people began calling out answers.

"It explodes!"

"It melts!"

"No, it vaporizes!"

"It gets gobbled up by rarefaction waves!"

The speaker was delighted.

"Who said that? Good. *Excellent.* It gets eaten away from all sides by rarefaction waves."

He paused for a moment and looked around the auditorium.

"This is a beautiful problem," he said. "A *beautiful* problem. And what makes it beautiful is this. It has..."

He paused again. The room was quiet.

"...an *exact solution.*"

My head was spinning. Suddenly, the air in the room felt too thick to breathe. I got up, knocking over the chair in front of me. The speaker paused and looked at me, his face expressionless. I could see heads in the audience turning toward me. I made my way to the aisle and walked quickly out of the

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room. About thirty seconds passed before I realized that I had been holding my breath. I stopped and leaned against a post, inhaled deeply, exhaled. I felt numb and shaken, and in some way I didn't quite understand yet, deeply ashamed. In front of me, next to the roulette table, a holo-loop of a busty blonde woman in a see-through cocktail dress smiled and held out her hand in a beckoning gesture. It was a short loop, only about three seconds, and the mechanical repetition of the movement seemed jerky and grotesque. I noticed one of the pit bosses giving me the hairy eyeball and I began to walk.

I'd like to say I hit some kind of moral high ground then and there, that I made a Commitment to Truth and World Peace, but it wasn't like that at all. I just walked. After a while I found myself in front of BALLY'S RENO VIRTUAL GOLF. I didn't feel much like swinging a golf club, but the idea of being out in the sun and resting my eyes on the spartan beauty of the California coast was very appealing. The same kid was sitting behind the counter and I nodded to him. He didn't bother with the rap this time, but led me to an empty booth and set me up. I closed my eyes, put the helmet on my head, and flicked the toggle switch.

It was the same place all right — I recognized the curving slope of the fairway and the steep dropoff to the ocean. But it was dark this time, a twilight so thick and purple it appeared almost luminous. Fat, greasy drops of black rain fell from a low, menacing overcast, and there was a sullen, red glow flickering on the bottom of the clouds off to the north. The cold wind ripping in off the ocean brought with it not only the smell of salt but something else, a sickly sweet miasma that made my gullet clench. *Death,* I thought. I don't know how I knew that, but I knew that it was true.

There was a squawk overhead and a flapping sound, and a large seagull landed heavily at my feet. The feathers on one side of its body were singed and blackened, and there were open sores showing through. Its eye on the burned side was an oozing wrinkle of raw flesh. It lay there in the wet grass, twitching feebly and flapping its wings.

I have to get out of here, I thought. I reached up to the side of my head and found the toggle switch, felt that peculiar sense of dislocation, like I was straddling a fence between two worlds. I pulled the switch. The rain-veiled twilight coast collapsed to a thin wavering line that curved around my entire field of vision and disappeared. The roar of wind and ocean faded to a hollow, velvet absence of sound. I pulled the helmet off and staggered up to the

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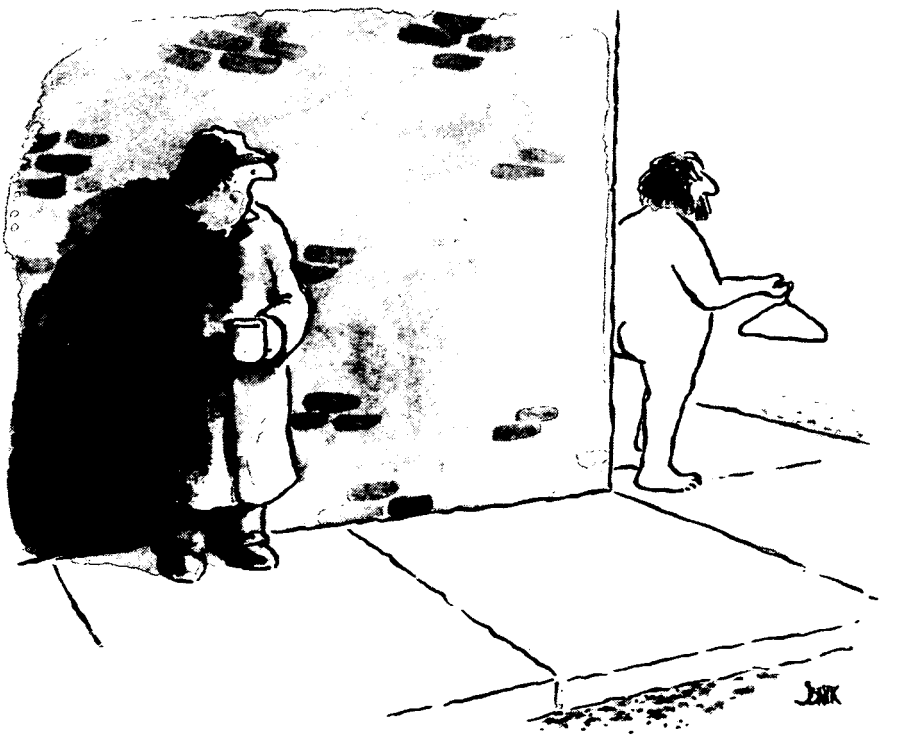
counter. The kid said something but it didn't register. I handed him the helmet and stumbled out into the corridor.

The next thing I knew I was in my room, sitting at my desk. I still have no memory of how I got there. My heart was pounding in my chest. I felt like I had been running all morning. It was time to stop. My hand hovered over the vidphone keypad, and the flat gray screen seemed to suck all the light from the room into itself. Almost of their own volition, my fingers punched out the code. In a few seconds, Olaf's face appeared on the screen. He smiled when he saw me, and in that instant I could see with incandescent clarity, held within the lines of his craggy, Slavic face, the soft, vulnerable features of a child. There was a sudden tightness in my mouth and throat, and for a moment, I could not speak.



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David Gerrold makes his living in Hollywood, but he still finds time to write novels and short stories. Bantam Books has just published his most recent novel, The Covenant of Justice. *His next novel,* The Middle of Nowhere, *is a sequel to* Voyage of the Star Wolf.

"The Martian Child" is one of the stranger stories to cross our desk this year. It is also one of the more compelling.

The Martian Child

By David Gerrold

TOWARD THE END OF THE meeting, the caseworker remarked, "Oh — and one more thing. Dennis thinks he's a Martian."

"I beg your pardon?" I wasn't certain I had heard her correctly. I had papers scattered all over the meeting room table — thick piles of stapled incident reports, manila-foldered psychiatric evaluations, Xeroxed clinical diagnoses, scribbled caseworker histories, typed abuse reports, bound trial transcripts, and my own crabbed notes as well: Hyperactivity. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Emotional Abuse. Physical Abuse. Conners Rating Scale. Apgars. I had no idea there was so much to know about children. For a moment, I was actually looked for the folder labeled *Martian*.

"He thinks he's a Martian," Ms. Bright repeated. She was a small woman, very proper and polite. "He told his group home parents that he's not like the other children — he's from Mars — so he shouldn't be expected to act like an Earthling all the time."

"Well, that's okay," I said, a little too quickly. "Some of my best friends

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are Martians. He'll fit right in. As long as he doesn't eat the tribbles or tease the feral Chtorran."

By the narrow expressions on their faces, I could tell that the caseworkers weren't amused. For a moment, my heart sank. Maybe I'd said the wrong thing. Maybe I was being too facile with my answers.

— The hardest thing about adoption is that *you have to ask someone to trust you with a child.*

That means that you have to be willing to let them scrutinize your entire life, everything: your financial standing, your medical history, your home and belongings, your upbringing, your personality, your motivations, your arrest record, your IQ, and even your sex life. It means that *every* self-esteem issue you have ever had will come bubbling right to the surface like last night's beans in this morning's bath tub.

Whatever you're most insecure about, that's what the whole adoption process will feel like it's focused on. For me, it was that terrible familiar feeling of being *second best* — of not being good enough to play with the big kids, or get the job, or win the award, or whatever was at stake. Even though the point of this interview was simply to see if Dennis and I would be a good match; I felt as if I was being judged again. What if I wasn't good enough this time?

I tried again. I began slowly. "Y'know, you all keep telling me all the bad news — you don't even know if this kid is capable of forming a deep attachment — it feels as if you're trying to talk me out of this match." I stopped myself before I said too much. I was suddenly angry and I didn't know why. These people were only doing their job.

And then it hit me. That was it — these people were *only* doing their job.

At that moment, I realized that there wasn't anyone in the room who had the kind of commitment to Dennis that I did, and I hadn't even met him yet. To them, he was only another case to handle. To me, he was...the possibility of a family. It wasn't fair to unload my frustration on these tired, overworked, underpaid women. They cared. It just wasn't the same kind of caring. I swallowed my anger.

"Listen," I said, sitting forward, placing my hands calmly and deliberately on the table. "After everything this poor little guy has been through, if he wants to think he's a Martian — I'm not going to argue with him. Actually, I think it's charming. It's evidence of his resilience. It's probably the most

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rational explanation he can come up with for his irrational situation. He probably feels alienated, abandoned, different, *alone.* At least, this gives him a reason for it. It lets him put a story around his situation so he can cope with it. Maybe it's the wrong explanation, but it's the only one he's got. We'd be stupid to try to take it away from him."

And after I'd said that, I couldn't help but add another thought as well. "I know a lot of people who hide out in fantasy because reality is too hard to cope with. Fantasy is my business. The only different is that I write it down and make the rest of the world pay for the privilege of sharing the delusion. Fantasy isn't about escape; it's a survival mechanism. It's a way to deal with things that are so much bigger than you are. So I think fantasy is special, something to be cherished and protected because it's a very fragile thing and without it, we're so defenseless, we're paralyzed.

"I know what this boy is feeling *because I've been there.* Not the same circumstances, thank God — but I know this much, if he's surrounded by adults who can't understand what he really needs, he'll never have that chance to connect that everyone keeps talking about." For the first time I looked directly into their eyes as if they had to live up to *my* standards. "Excuse me for being presumptuous—but he's got to be with someone who'll tell him that it's all right for him to be a Martian. Let him be a Martian for as long as he needs."

"Yes. Thank you," the supervisor said abruptly. "I think that's everything we need to cover. We'll be getting back to your shortly."

My heart sank at her words. She hadn't acknowledged a word of what I'd said. I was certain she'd dismissed it totally. I gathered up all my papers. We exchanged pleasantries and handshakes, and I wore my company smile all the way to the elevator. I didn't say a word, neither did my sister. We both waited until we were in the car and headed back toward the Hollywood Freeway. She drove, guiding the big car through traffic as effortlessly as only a Los Angeles real estate agent can manage.

"I blew it," I said. "Didn't I? I got too...full of myself again."

"Honey, I think you were fine." She patted my hand.

"They're not going to make the match," I said. "It would be a single parent adoption. They're not going to do it. First they choose married couples, Ward and June. Then they choose single women, Murphy Brown. Then, only if there's no one else who'll take the kid, will they consider a single man. I'm

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at the bottom of the list. I'll never get this kid. I'll never get *any* kid. My own caseworker told me not to get my hopes up. There are two other families interested. This was just a formality, this interview. I know it. Just so they could prove they'd considered more than one match." I felt the frustration building up inside my chest like a balloon full of hurt. "But this is the kid for me, Alice, I know it. I don't know how I know it, but I do."

I'd first seen Dennis's picture three weeks earlier; a little square of colors that suggested a smile in flight.

I'd gone to the National Conference of the Adoptive Families of America at the Los Angeles Airport Hilton. There were six panels per hour, six hours a day, two days, Saturday and Sunday. I picked the panels that I thought would be most useful to me in finding and raising a child and ordered tapes — over two dozen — of the sessions I couldn't attend in person. I'd had no idea there were so many different issues to be dealt with in adoptions. I soaked it up like a sponge, listening eagerly to the advice of adoptive parents, their grown children, clinical psychologists, advocates, social workers, and adoption resource professionals.

But my *real* reason for attending was to find *the child.*

I'd already been approved. I'd spent more than a year filling out forms and submitting to interviews. But approval doesn't mean you get a child. It only means that your name is in the hat. Matching is done to meet the child's needs first. Fair enough — but terribly frustrating.

Eventually, I ended up in the conference's equivalent of a dealer's room. Rows of tables and heart-tugging displays. Books of all kinds for sale. Organizations. Agencies. Children in Eastern Europe. Children in Latin America. Asian children. Children with special needs. Photo-listings, like real-estate albums. Turn the pages, look at the eyes, the smiles, the needs. "Johnny was abandoned by his mother at age three. He is hyperactive, starts fires, and has been cruel to small animals. He will need extensive therapy...." "Janie, age 9, is severely retarded. She was sexually abused by her stepfather, she will need round-the-clock care...." "Michael suffers from severe epilepsy...." "Linda *needs*...." "Danny *needs*...." "Michael *needs*...." So many *needs.* So much hurt. It was overwhelming.

Why were so many of the children in the books "special needs" children? Retarded. Hyperactive. Abused. Had they been abandoned because they weren't perfect, or were these the leftovers after all the good children were

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selected? The part that disturbed me the most was that I could understand the emotions involved. I wanted a child, not a case. And some of the descriptions in the book did seem pretty intimidating. Were these the only kind of children available?

Maybe it was selfish, but I found myself turning the pages looking for a child who represented an easy answer. Did I really want another set of *needs* in my life — a single man who's old enough to be considered middle-aged and ought to be thinking seriously about retirement plans?

This was the most important question of all. "Why do you want to adopt a child?" And it was a question I couldn't answer. I couldn't find the words. It seemed that there was something I couldn't write down.

The motivational questionnaire had been a brick wall that sat on my desk for a week. It took me thirty pages of single-spaced printout just to get my thoughts organized. I could tell great stories about what I thought a family should be, but I couldn't really answer the question why *I* wanted a son. Not right away.

The three o'clock in the morning truth of it was a very nasty and selfish piece of business.

I didn't want to die alone. I didn't want to be left unremembered.

All those books and TV scripts...they were nothing. They used up trees. They were exercises in excess. They made other people rich. They were useless to me. They filled up shelves. They impressed the impressionable. But they didn't prove me a real person. They didn't validate my life as one worth living. In fact, they were about as valuable as the vice-presidency of the United States.

What I *really* wanted was to make a difference. I wanted someone to know that there was a real person behind all those words. A dad.

I would lie awake, staring into the darkness, trying to imagine it, what it would be like, how I would handle the various situations that might come up, how I would deal with the day-to-day business of daddying. I gamed out scenarios and tried to figure out how to handle difficult situations.

In my mind, I was always kind and generous, compassionate and wise. My fantasy child was innocent and joyous, full of love and wide-eyed wonder, and grateful to be in my home. He was an invisible presence, living inside my soul, defying reality to catch up. I wondered where he was now, and how and when I would finally meet him — and if the reality of parenting would be as

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wonderful as the dream.

— But it was all fantasyland. The books were proof of that. These children had histories, brutal, tragic, and heart-rending.

I wandered on to the next table. One of the social workers from the Los Angeles County Department of Children's Services had a photo book with her. I introduced myself, told her I'd been approved — but not matched. Could I look through the book? Yes, of course, she said. I turned the pages slowly, studying the innocent faces, looking for one who could be my son. All the pictures were of black children, and the county wasn't doing transracial adoptions anymore. Too controversial. The black social workers had taken a stand against it — I could see their point — but how many of these children would not find homes now?

Tucked away like an afterthought on the very last page was a photo of the only white child in the book. My glance slid across the picture quickly, I was already starting to close the album — and then as the impact of what I'd seen hit me, I froze in mid-action, almost slamming the book flat again.

The boy was riding a bicycle on a sunny tree-lined sidewalk; he was caught in the act of shouting or laughing at whoever was holding the camera. His blond hair was wild in the wind of his passage, his eyes shone like stars behind his glasses, his expression was raucous and exuberant.

I couldn't take my eyes off the picture. A cold wave of certainty came rolling up my spine like a blast of fire and ice. It was a feeling of *recognition.* This was *him* — the child who'd taken up permanent residence in my imagination! I could almost hear him yelling, "Hi, Daddy!"

"Tell me about this child," I said, a little too quickly. The social worker was already looking at me oddly. I could understand it. My voice sounded odd to me too. I tried to explain. "Tell me. Do you ever get people looking at a picture and telling you that this is the one?"

"All the time," she replied. Her face softened into an understanding smile.

His name was Dennis. He'd just turned eight. She'd just put his picture in the book this morning. And yes, she'd have the boy's caseworker get in touch with my caseworker. But...she cautioned...remember that there might be other families interested too. And remember, the department matches from the child's side.

I didn't hear any of that. I heard the words, but not the cautions.

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I pushed hard and they set up a meeting to see if the match would work. But they cautioned me ahead of time — "this might not be the child you're looking for. He's classified as 'hard-to-place.' He's hyperactive and he's been emotionally abused and he may have fetal alcohol effects and he's been in eight foster homes, he's never had a family of his own...."

I didn't hear a word of it. I simply refused to listen. The boy in the picture had grabbed my heart so completely that I'd suddenly expanded all my definitions of what I was willing to accept.

I posted messages on CompuServe asking for information and advice on adoption, on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, on emotional abuse recovery, on everything I could think of — what were this child's chances of becoming an independent adult? I called the Adoption Warm Line and was referred to parents who'd been through it. I hit the bookstores and the libraries. I called my cousin, the doctor, and he faxed me twenty pages of reports. And I came into the meeting so well-papered and full of theories and good intentions that I must have looked the perfect jerk.

And now...it was over.

I leaned my head against the passenger side window of my sister's car and moaned. "Dammit. I'm so *tired* of being pregnant. Thirteen months is long enough for any man! I've got the baby blues so bad, I can't even go to the supermarket anymore. I find myself watching other people with their children and the tears start welling up in my eyes. I keep thinking, 'Where's *mine*?'"

My sister understood. She had four children of her own, none of whom had ended up in jail; so she had to have done something right. "Listen to me, David. Maybe this little boy isn't right for you — "

"Of course he's right for me. He's a Martian."

She ignored the interruption. "And if he isn't right, there'll be another child who is. I promise you. And you said it yourself that you didn't know if you could handle all the problems he'd be bringing with him."

"I know — it's just that...I feel like — I don't know what I feel like. This is worse than anything I've ever been through. All this wanting and not having. Sometimes I'm afraid it's not going to happen at all."

Alice pulled the car over to the curb and turned off the engine. "Okay, it's my turn," she said. "Stop beating yourself up. You are the smartest one in the whole family — but sometimes you can be awfully stupid. You are

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going to be a terrific father to some very lucky little boy. Your caseworker knows that. All of those social workers in that meeting saw your commitment and dedication. All that research you did — when you asked about the Apgar numbers and the Conners scale, when you handed them that report on hyperactivity, which even they didn't know about — you *impressed* them."

I shook my head. "Research is easy. You post a note on CompuServe, wait two days, and then download your e-mail."

"It's not the research," Alice said. "It's the fact that you did it. That demonstrates your willingness to find out what the child needs so you can provide it."

"I wish I could believe you," I said.

She looked deeply at me. "What's the matter?"

"What if I'm really *not* good enough?" I said. "That's what I'm worried about — I can't shake that feeling."

"Oh, that — " she said, lightly. "*That's* normal. That's the proof that you're going to do okay. It's only those parents who don't worry who need to."

"Oh," I said. And then we both started laughing.

She hugged me then. "You'll do fine. Now let's go home and call Mom before she busts a kidney from the suspense."

Two centuries later, although the calendar insisted otherwise, Ms. Bright called me. "We've made a decision. If you're still interested in Dennis, we'd like to arrange a meeting — " I don't remember a lot of what she said after that; most of it was details about how we would proceed; but I remember what she said at the end. "I want to tell you the two things that helped us make the decision. First, all that research you did shows that you're committed to Dennis's needs. That's very important in any adoption, but especially in this one. The other thing was what you said at the end of the meeting — about understanding his need to be a Martian. We were really touched by your empathy for his situation. We think that's a quality that Dennis is going to need very much in any family he's placed in. That's why we decided to try you first."

I thanked her profusely; at least, I think I did; I was suddenly having trouble seeing, and the box of tissues had gone empty.

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I MET DENNIS THREE days later, at the Johnson Group Home in Culver City. He was one of six children living at the facility; four boys, two girls. Because the caseworkers didn't want him to know that he was being *auditioned*, I would be introduced as a friend of the group home parents.

The child who came home from school was a sullen little zombie, going through the motions of life. He walked in the door, walked past me with no sign of recognition, and headed straight to his room. I said, "Hi." He grunted something that could have been "H'lo" and kept on going. For a moment, I felt somehow cheated. I recognized him, why hadn't he recognized me? And then I had to remind myself with a grin that I was the grownup, not him. But, after a bit, he came out from his retreat and asked me to play electric hockey.

For the first few minutes, he was totally intent on the game. I didn't exist to him. Then I remembered an exercise from one of my communications courses — about simply *being with* another person. I stopped trying so hard to do it *right*, and instead just focused my attention on Dennis, letting it be all right with me for him to be exactly the way he was.

And yet, I couldn't turn off the analytical part of my mind. After reading all those reports, and hearing all the opinions of the caseworkers, I couldn't help but watch for evidence. I couldn't see it. None of it. All I could see was a child. And then that thing happened that always happens to an adult who is willing to play with a child. I rediscovered my own childhood again. I got involved in the game, and very shortly I was smiling and laughing when he did, returning the same delight and approval at every audacious play. And that's when it happened. He began to realize that there was a real human being on the opposite side of the game board. Something sparked. He started reacting to me instead of to the puck. I could feel the sense of connection almost as a physical presence.

Then, abruptly, it was time for him to do his chores. We loaded up the wagon with the cans from the recycling bin and walked them over to the nearby park. We talked about stuff. He talked, I listened. Sometimes I asked questions, sometimes he did. On the way back, he insisted that I pull the wagon so he could ride in it. By now, he was glowing. He was the boy in the photograph.

When we got back to the group home, however, the other children had arrived home from school and were already playing together in the back yard.

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As soon as he saw them, Dennis broke away from me and ran to the back of the yard. He flung himself into the corner of a large old couch and curled up in a ball. He was as apart from the other children — indeed the whole world — as it was possible to get.

What had suddenly triggered his unhappiness? Was it the thought that now that there were other children to play with, I would reject him? Did he have to reject me first? Or was there something else going on? From inside the house, I watched him as he sat alone. He was a very unhappy little boy. And he had stopped glowing. At that moment, I knew I couldn't leave him here. Whatever other problems he might have, my commitment was bigger. Or so I believed.

The group home parents invited me to stay to dinner with the children. I hadn't planned on it, but all the children insisted that I stay, so I did, specifically making a point of sitting next to Dennis. He didn't talk at all, he was subdued, as if he was afraid of losing something that he wanted very much — or maybe that was only my perception. He ate quietly and timidly. But then Tony, one of the more excitable children, suddenly piped up, "Do you know what Dennis said?"

Tony was sitting directly across from me. He had that look of malicious mischief common to children who are about to betray a confidence. "What?" I asked, with a queasy foreboding.

"Dennis said he wishes you were his dad." Even without looking, I could see that beside me, Dennis was cringing, readying himself for the inevitable politely worded rejection.

Instead, I turned to Dennis, focusing all my attention on him, and said, "Wow, what a great wish. Thank you!" There was more I wanted to add, but I couldn't. Not yet. The "game plan" required me to be Dennis's "special friend" for at least six weeks before I made any kind of commitment to him. He couldn't know that I had the same wish he did. I felt cheated at not being able to add, "So do I." But I understood the rationale, and I would follow it.

"Better watch out," Tony said. "He might make it a Martian wish, and then you'll *have* to."

At the time, I didn't understand what Tony had meant. So I forgot about it.

The next time I heard about Martians happened thirteen months later.

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I was in Arizona, at a party at Jeff Duntemann's sprawling house. Jeff is a two-time Hugo nominee who gave up science fiction to write books about computer programming. Apparently, it was far more profitable than science fiction; now he was publishing his own magazine, *PC-Techniques*. I write a regular column for the magazine, an off-the-wall mix of code and mutated zen. It was the standing joke that my contribution to the magazine was the "Martian perspective."

I was sitting on the patio, watching Dennis splash enthusiastically across the pool. He was doing cannonballs into the deep end. A year ago, I couldn't pry him loose from the steps in the shallow end; he wouldn't even let me teach him how to dog-paddle — now he was an apprentice fish. He spent more time swimming across the bottom of the water than the top.

A year ago, he'd been a waif — capable of joy, the picture proved that — but more often sad, uncertain, alienated, and angry. A year ago, he'd told his caseworker, "I don't think God listens to my prayers. I prayed for a dad and nothing happened." On the day he moved in, I asked his caseworker to remind him of that conversation and then tell him that sometimes it takes God a little while to make a miracle happen.

A miracle — according to my friend Randy Macnamara — is something that wouldn't have happened anyway. Now, after the fact, after the first giddy days of panic and joy, after the days of bottomless fears, after the tantrums and the testing, after a thousand and one peanut butter and jellyfish sandwiches, I understood what he meant. And more. A miracle takes real commitment. It never happens by accident. I'd had other miracles happen in my life — one which I'd written about, one which I may never write about — but this one was the best. I had the proof of it framed on my wall.

One afternoon I'd opened Dennis's lunch kit to see how much he'd eaten and found the note I'd packed that morning. It said, "Please eat your whole lunch today! I love you! Daddy." On the other side, written in a childish scrawl was Dennis's reply: "*I love you to. you are very specil to me. I realy think your the best. I love you very much dady I never loved eneyone more than you. I never new anyone nicer than you.*" At the bottom, he'd drawn three hearts and put the word "dady" in the biggest of them.

So the miracle was complete. Dennis *could* form a deep attachment. And he could express it. And all I had to do was sit and glow and realize that despite all my doubts and all my mistakes, I was getting the important part of the job

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done right. I had passed from wannabe to gonnabe to finding-how-to-be to simply be-ing. I was glowing as brightly as the warm Arizona evening. Pink clouds were striped across the darkening twilight sky.

I didn't know anyone else at the party besides Jeff and Carol — and the world-famous Mr. Byte who was in the kitchen begging scraps he wasn't supposed to have. But that was all right. I was content just to sit and watch my son enjoying himself. And then I heard the word "Martian" in back of me, and without moving, my attention swiveled 180 degrees.

Four of the wives were sitting together — it was that kind of party; the programmers were talking code, the wives were talking children. I didn't know enough about either subject, I still felt like a dabbler in both fields, so I made the best kind of listener. One of the women was saying. "No, it's true. Since she was old enough to talk she's insisted that she's a Martian. Her mother has never been able to convince her otherwise. She asked her, 'How do you explain that I remember going to the hospital and giving birth to you?' and she said, 'I was implanted in your tummy.' She's twelve now and she still believes it. She has a whole story, an explanation for everything. She says UFOs are implanting Martian babies all the time."

The other women laughed gently. I found myself smiling to myself and watching Dennis. Remembering for the first time in a long while what he'd once told his caseworker — that he was a Martian too. Interesting coincidence.

Then, one of the others said, "We had a boy in my daughter's school who wore a T-shirt to school almost every day that said, 'I am a Martian.' He took a lot of teasing about it. The principal tried to make him stop wearing it, but he refused. All the kids thought he was crazy."

"That was probably the only way he could get the attention he needed."

"Well," said the fourth voice, "it's a common childhood fantasy — that the child is really a changeling or an orphan and that you're not her real mother. Adding Mars to it is just a way to take advantage of the information in the real world to make it more believable."

I didn't hear any more of that conversation; we were interrupted by Carol announcing that dessert was served; but a seed of inquiry had been planted. If nothing else, I thought it might make an interesting story. If only I could figure out an ending for it. Let's see, a man adopts a little boy and then discovers that the child is a Martian.

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Hm. But what's the hook?

Horror story? Too easy. Too obvious — the Martian children are going to murder us in our beds. Besides, Richard Matheson could do it better, if he hadn't already. John Wyndham already had. A hidden invasion? The Martians will take us over without our ever knowing? Fred Brown had beaten me to it by four decades. His story had even ended up as an episode on Hitchcock. Maybe something tender and gentle instead? Parenting a starlost orphan? That would be the hardest to write — and Zenna Henderson had already written it several times over. Sturgeon was another one who could handle that angle. I wished I could pick up the phone and call him. He would have had the most interesting insight for the ending, but the connect charges would have been horrendous. I could call Harlan, of course, but he'd probably bitch at me for interrupting him during *Jeopardy*. Besides, I didn't think he would take this question seriously. "Harlan, listen — I think my son's a Martian, and I'm trying to write it up as a story...." Yeah, right, David. Have you had your medication checked recently?

I made a mental note to think about it later. Maybe my subconscious would think about it during the drive home. Maybe I'd stumble across an ending by accident. I really couldn't do anything at all without an ending in mind. It's easy to start a story, but if you don't know the ending, you don't know what you're writing toward and after a while the story goes adrift, the energy fails, and you've got one more thing to be frustrated about. I had a file cabinet full of unfinished stories to prove that this was not the best way to generate pay copy.

The next day...we were slicing across the desolate red desert, seemingly suspended between the blazing sky and the shimmering road, not talking about anything, just listening to a tape of Van Dyke Parks and sipping sodas from the cooler. The tape came to an end and the white noise of the wind rushed in to envelop us. Convertibles are fun, but they aren't quiet.

Abruptly, I remembered last night's conversation.

"Hey," I asked. "Are you a Martian?"

"What?"

"Are you a Martian?" I repeated.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Ah, obviously you're a Jewish Martian. You answer a question with a question."

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"Who told you I was a Martian?"

"Kathy did. Before I met you, we had a meeting. She told me all about you. She said that you told her you were a Martian. Do you remember telling her that?"

"Yes."

"Are you still a Martian?"

"Yes," he said.

"Oh," I said. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Okay," he said. "I was made on Mars. I was a tadpole. Then I was brought to Earth in a UFO and implanted in my Mommy's tummy. She didn't know. Then I was borned."

"Ahh," I said. "That's how I thought it happened. Is that all?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why did the Martians send you here?"

"So I could be a Earth-boy."

"Oh."

"Can we go to Round Table Pizza for dinner?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject as if it was the most natural thing to do.

"Do Martians like pizza?"

"Yes!" he said excitedly. Then he pointed his fingers at me like a funny kind of ray gun. Most children would have pointed the top two fingers to make a pretend gun, but Dennis pointed his index and little fingers, his thumb stood straight up for the trigger. "If you don't take me out for pizza tonight, I'll have to disneygrade you."

"Ouch, that sounds painful. I definitely do not want to be disneygraded. Then I'd have to stand in the dark and sing that awful song forever while boatloads of Japanese tourists take pictures of me. But we're not going tonight. Maybe tomorrow, if you have a good day at school."

"No, tonight!" He pointed his fingers menacingly — both hands now — and for a moment I wondered what would happen if he pressed his thumbs forward. Would I be turned into a giant three-fingered mouse?

"If you disneygrade me," I said, "for sure you won't get any pizza."

"Okay," he said. Then he closed up both weapons, first one hand, then the other. First the little finger of his left hand, then the index finger; then the little finger of his right hand, then the index finger. Each time he made a soft clicking sound with his mouth. Finally he folded his thumbs down — and

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abruptly he had hands again.

Later, I tried to do the same thing myself. A human can do it, but it's like the Vulcan salute. It takes practice.

I HAVE PINCHED A nerve in my back. If I do my twisting exercises a couple of times a week, and if I take frequent breaks from the keyboard, and if I remember to put myself into the spa every couple days and let the bubbles boil up around me, then I can keep myself functioning pretty much like a normal person. It's a fair trade. Usually I wait until after dinner to sit in the spa. After the sun sets is a perfect time for a little skinnydipping.

Several days after the Phoenix trip, Dennis and I were alone in the pool. The pool has a blue filter over the light, the spa has a red one; when the bubbles are on, it looks a little like a hot lava bath. Sometimes we talk about nothing important, sometimes we just sit silently letting the bubbles massage our skins, sometimes we stare up into the sky and watch for meteors; once we'd seen a bright red starpoint streak across the sky like a bullet.

But tonight, as he splashed in the bubbles, I found myself studying the way the light shaped his features. I'm not an expert on the development of children's skulls, but abruptly I was struck by the odd proportions of his forehead and eyes.

Before I'd adopted him, I'd been given copies of various doctor's reports. one doctor, who was supposed to be looking for fetal alcohol effects, had described the five-year-old Dennis as "an unusual-looking" child. I couldn't see what he was talking about. To me, Dennis had always been an unusually good-looking boy.

There are only two shapes of faces — pie and horse. Dennis was a pie-face, I'm a horse. In that, he was lucky because his smile was so wide he *needed* a round face to hold it all. He was blessed with dark blond hair which was growing steadily toward shoulder-length. His eyes were puppy-brown and hidden behind lashes long enough to trouble the sleep of mascara manufacturers. His complexion was as luminous and gold as an Arizona sunset.

His body was well-proportioned too; he had long legs and a swimmer's torso. He was thin, but not skinny. He looked like a Disney child. I expected him to be a heartbreaker when he grew up. The girls were going to chase him with lassos. Already I wondered what kind of a teenager he would become —

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and if I would be able to handle it.

Now...seeing him in the reflected red light of the spa — is this the same color light they have on Mars? — he did look a little *alien* to me. His forehead had a roundish bulge toward the crown. His cheekbones seemed strangely angled. His eyes seemed narrow and reptilian. Probably it was the effect of the light coming from underneath instead of above, combined with the red filter, but it was momentarily unnerving. For a moment, I wondered what kind of a *thing* I'd brought into my life.

"What?" he asked, staring back.

"Nothing," I said.

"You were looking at me."

"I was admiring you. You're a beautiful kid, do you know that?"

"Uh-huh." And suddenly he was Dennis again.

"How do you know that?"

"Everybody says so. They all like my eyelashes."

I laughed. Of course. Here was a child who'd learned to work the system. He was a skilled manipulator. He'd learned real fast how to turn on his special smile and get what he wanted out of people. Of course he knew how much attention his eyelashes attracted.

But — for a moment there, he hadn't been Dennis the little boy. He'd been something else. Something cold and watchful. He'd noticed me studying him. He'd sensed the suspicion. Or was it just the power of suggestion at work? Most of the books on parenting advised not to feel guilty for wondering if your child is going to suddenly catch a fly with his tongue. It's a very common parental fear.

And then...whenever I had doubts about Dennis and my ability to keep up with him, all I had to do was ask myself one simple question. How would I feel if Kathy Bright said she had to remove him from my home? *Ripped apart* was the simplest answer. The truth was, I didn't care if he was a Martian or not, I was as *bonded* to him as he was to me.

But out of curiosity, and possibly just to reassure myself that I was imagining things, I logged onto CompuServe. The ISSUES forum has a parenting section. I left a message under the heading, "Is your child a Martian?"

My little boy says he's a Martian. I've heard of two other children who

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claim to be Martians as well. Has anyone else heard of children who believe that they're from Mars?

Over the course of the next few days — before the message scrolled off the board and into the bit-bucket — I received thirty-three replies.

Several of the messages were thoughtful analyses of why a child might say such a thing; it was pretty much what that mother in Phoenix had surmised; it's common for children to fantasize that they have glamorous origins. In the past, children might have believed they were secretly princes and princesses and one day their real parents would arrive to take them to their golden castles. But because that mythology has now been superseded by starships and mutants, it's more appropriate for children to fantasize about traveling away on the *Millennium Falcon* or the *Enterprise.* But if a child was experienced enough to know that those stories were just fiction, he would also know that Mars was a real planet; therefore...Mars gave credibility to the fantasy. Etcetera. Etcetera. Local mileage may vary, but if the delusion persists, see a good therapist. It may be evidence of some deeper problem. Etcetera some more.

I knew what Dennis's deeper problems were. He'd been bounced around the foster care system for eight years before landing in my arms. He didn't know *where* he came from or *where* he belonged.

Several of the replies I received were from other parents sharing pieces of weirdness their own children had demonstrated. Interesting, but not particularly useful to my inquiry.

But...there were over a dozen private messages.

"My sister's little girl used to insist that she'd been brought to Earth in a UFO and implanted in her mommy's tummy while her mommy was asleep. She kept this up until she was about fourteen, then abruptly stopped. After that, she wouldn't answer questions about it at all."

"My next door neighbors had a boy who said he wasn't from Earth. He disappeared when he was twelve. Without a trace. The police assumed he was kidnapped."

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"My ex-wife was a child psychologist. She used to joke about her Martian children. She said she could tell how crazy New York was by the number of Martians she saw in any given year. At first she used to tell the parents that same old same old about children needing to fantasize about a glamorous background, but later on she began to wonder. The stories the kids told were all very similar. They began life as Martian tadpoles brought to Earth and implanted in the uteruses of Earth women. She always wanted to do a study on Martian children, but she could never get a grant."

"I dated a girl once who said she was from Mars. She was very insistent on it. When I tried to get serious with her, she turned me down flat. She said she really liked me, but it wouldn't work out between us. When I asked her why, she said it was because she was from Mars. That's all. I guess Martians have a rule against marrying outside their species."

"I heard about a Martian when I was in high school. He killed himself. I didn't know him. I only heard about it afterward."

"I thought I was from Mars once. I even had memories of being on Mars. It had a pink sky. That's how I knew it was Mars. When the photos came in from JPL showing that Mars really did have a pink sky, just like in my memories, I thought that proved something. When I told my parents, they took me to see a doctor. I was in therapy for a long time, but I'm fine now. Maybe you should get your son into therapy too."

It was the last one that really got to me. I knew the person who sent it meant to be reassuring, but instead, his message had the opposite effect.

Okay, maybe it's me. Maybe it's because I'm a writer. I read subtext where none is intended. And maybe the cumulative effect of all these messages, especially the wistful, almost plaintive tone of the last one left me with a very uncomfortable feeling.

I replied to all of these messages.

I know this sounds silly, but please indulge me. What did your Martian

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friend/relative look like? Did he/she have any special physical characteristics or medical problems? What was his/her personality like? Do you know what happened to him or her? Does he/she still believe that he/she is from Mars?

It took a week or two to compile the responses. Of the ten Martians specifically mentioned, two had committed suicide. One was successful in business. Three refused to talk about Mars. Two were "cured." The whereabouts of the others were unknown. Three were missing. Two of the missing had been repeated runaways during their teen years. I wondered where they thought they were running *to.*

Of the ten Martians, six were known to have had golden-brown skin, round faces, brown eyes and very long eyelashes. The hair color was generally dark blond or brown. That was an interesting statistical anomaly.

Of the ten Martians, five were hyperactive, two were epileptic. The other three weren't known.

I asked the fellow whose ex-wife had been a child psychologist if she'd ever noticed any statistical patterns among her Martians. He said he didn't know and he didn't even know her whereabouts anymore. She had disappeared two years earlier.

I called my friend, Steve Barnes. He'd written one of the character references I'd needed to adopt Dennis, and because of that I regarded him as an unofficial godfather to the boy. We chatted about this and that and the other thing for awhile. And then, finally, I said, "Steve — do you know about the Martian phenomenon?" He didn't. I told him about it. He asked me if I was smoking dope again.

"I'm serious, Steve."

"So am I."

"I haven't touched that crap since I kicked out she-who-must-not-be-named," I said it angrily.

"Just checking. You gotta admit that's a pretty bizarre story, though."

"I know that. That's why I'm telling you. You're one of the few people I know who will actually consider it fairly. Geez — why is it that science fiction writers are the most skeptical animals of all?"

"Because we get to deal with more crazies than anyone else," Steve

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replied without missing a beat.

"I don't know what to do with this," I said, admitting my frustration. "I know it sounds like one more crazy UFO mystery. Only this one is something that can actually be validated. This is the kind of statistical anomaly that can't be explained away by coincidence. And I bet there's a lot more to it too. Like, what was the blood type of all those children? What was the phase of the moon? What are their favorite foods? How well did they do in school? What if there's something really going on here? — maybe not Martians, maybe some kind of social phenomenon or syndrome — I don't know what it is, I don't know what else to ask, and I don't know who to tell. Most of all, I don't want to end up on the front page of the *Inquirer*. Can't you just see it? 'SCI-FI WRITER HAS MARTIAN CHILD!'"

"It might be good for your career," Steve said thoughtfully. "I wonder how many new readers you could pick up."

"Oh, yeah, sure. And I wonder how many old readers I'll lose. I'd like to be taken seriously in my old age, Steve. Remember what happened to what's-his-name."

"I'll never forget old what's-his-name," Steve said. "Yeah, that was a real sad story."

"Anyway..." I said. "You see my point? Where do I go from here?"

"You want my *real* advice?" Steve asked. He didn't wait for my reply. "Don't go anywhere with it. Drop it. Let someone else figure it out. Or no one. You said it yourself, David. 'It's almost always dangerous to be right too soon.' Don't go borrowing trouble. Turn it into a story if you must and let people think it's a harmless fantasy. But don't let it screw up your life. You wanted this kid, didn't you? Now you have him. Just parent him. That's the only thing that's really wanted and needed."

He was right. I knew it. But I couldn't accept it. "Sure. That's easy for you to say. You don't have a Martian in the house."

"Yes I do." He laughed. "Only mine's a girl."

"Huh — ?"

"Don't you get it? *All* children are Martians. We get thirteen years to civilize the little monsters. After that, it's too late. Then they start eating our hearts out for the rest of our lives."

"You sound like my mother now."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

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"It's a good thing you don't know her, or you wouldn't say that."

"Listen to me, David," and his tone of voice was so serious that six different jokes died before they could pass my lips. "You're right on schedule. Have you ever really looked at the faces of new parents? Most of them are walking around in a state of shock, wondering what happened — what is this loathsome reptilian thing that has suddenly invaded their lives? It's part of the process of assimilation. The only difference is that you have a more active imagination than most people. You know how to name your fears. Trust me on this, Toni and I went through it too with Nicki. We thought she was a — never mind. Just know that this normal. There are days when you are absolutely certain that you've got a cute and stinky little alien in your house."

"But *every* day?"

"Trust me. It passes. In a year or two, you won't even remember what your life was like before."

"Hmm. Maybe that's how long it takes a Martian to brainwash his human hosts...."

Steve sighed. "You've got it bad."

"Yes, I do," I admitted.

The Martian thing gnawed at me like an ulcer. I couldn't get it out of my head. No matter what we did, the thought was there.

If we went out front to swat koosh-balls back and forth, I wondered if the reason he was having trouble with his coordination was the unfamiliar gravity of Earth. If we went in the back yard and jumped in the pool together, I wondered if his attraction to water was because it was so scarce on Mars. I wondered about his ability to hear a piece of music a single time and still remember the melody so clearly that he could sing it again, note for note, a month later; he would walk through the house singing songs that he could not have heard except on the tapes I occasionally played; how many nine-year-olds know how to sing *My Clone Sleeps Alone* like Pat Benatar? I wondered why he had so little interest in comic books, but loved to watch television dramas about the relationships of human beings. He hated *Star Trek*, he thought it was "too silly." He loved the Discovery channel — especially all the shows about animals and insects.

There was no apparent pattern to his behavior, nothing that could be pointed to as evidence of otherworldliness. Indeed, the fact that he was

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making his father paranoid was a very strong argument that he was a normal Earth kid.

And then, just when I'd forgotten...something would happen. Maybe he'd react to something on television with an off-the-wall comment that would make me look over at him curiously. There was that Bugs Bunny cartoon, for instance, where the rabbit is making life difficult for Marvin the Martian, stealing the detonator so he can't blow up the Earth. In the middle of it, Dennis quietly declared, "No, that's wrong. Martians aren't like that." Then he got up and turned the television set *off*.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"Because it was wrong," he said blandly.

"But it's only a cartoon." One of my *favorite* cartoons, I might add.

"It's still wrong." And then he turned and went outside as if the whole concept of television would never be interesting to him again.

AND NOW, almost two years to the day since I'd filled out the first application, the nickel finally dropped and I sat up in bed in the middle of the night. Why were so many adopted children *hyperactive?*

The evidence was all around me. I just hadn't noticed it before. It was there in the photo-listing books. It seemed as if every third child was hyperactive. It was acknowledged in the books, the articles, the seminars, the tapes...that a higher proportion of foster children have Attention Deficit Disorder, also called Hyperactivity. Why was that?

Some theorists suggested that it was the result of substance abuse by the parents, which is why we saw it more in abandoned and unwanted children. Some doctors believed that hyperactivity was the result of the body's failure to produce certain key enzymes in response to physical stimulation; therefore the child needed to overstimulate himself in order to produce an equivalent amount of calming. Still others postulated that there was an emotional component to the disorder; that it was a response to a lack of nurturing. Most interesting of all to me was the offhand note in one article that some theorists believed that many cases of ADD were actually misdiagnoses. If you were unattached and didn't know who you were or where you had come from or where you were going, you'd have a lot to worry about; your attention might be distracted too.

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Or...what if the behavior that was judged abnormal for Earth children was perfectly normal for Martian children? What if there was no such thing as ADD...in Martians?

At this point, I'd reached the limits of my ability to research the question. Who could I tell? Who would have the resources to pursue this further? And who would take me seriously?

Suppose I picked up the *Los Angeles Times* tomorrow and saw that Ben Bova had called a press conference to announce that he'd been kidnapped by aliens and taken into space where they'd performed bizarre sexual experiments on him...would I believe him? Ben is one of the most believable men in the world. Once, he almost talked me into voting for Ronald Reagan. But if I saw a report like that in the newspaper, the first thing I'd do would be to call Barbara and ask if Ben were all right.

In other words...there was simply no way for me to research this question without destroying all of my credibility as a writer.

Even worse, *there was no way to research it without also destroying my credibility as a parent.*

Up until this time, I'd always been candid with the caseworkers and therapists; I'd talked to them about our discipline problems, about my feelings of frustration, about ever little step in the right direction and every major victory. But...suddenly, I realized this was something I couldn't talk to them about. Suppose I called Kathy Bright. What could I say? "Uh, Kathy, it's David. I want to talk to you about Dennis. You know how he says he's a Martian? Well, I think he might *really* be a Martian and..."

Uh-huh.

If the adoptive father was starting to have hallucinations about the child, how long would the Department of Children's Services leave the child in that placement? About twenty minutes, I figured. About as long as it took to get out there and pick him up. She'd pull him out of my house so fast they'd be hearing sonic booms in Malibu. And I wouldn't even be able to argue. She'd be right to do so. A child needs a stable and nurturing environment. How stable and nurturing would it be for him to be living with an adult who suspects he's from another planet and is wondering about his ultimate motives.

If I pursued this, I'd lose my son.

The thought was intolerable. I might never recover. I was sure that he

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wouldn't. For the first time in his life, he'd finally formed an attachment. What would it do to him to have it broken so abruptly? It would truly destroy his ability to trust any other human being.

I couldn't do that to him. I couldn't do *anything* that might hurt him.

And what about me? I had my own "attachment issues." I couldn't stand the thought of another failure. Another brick in the wall, as they say.

That was where I stayed stuck for the longest time. I walked around the house in physical pain for three weeks. My chest hurt. My head hurt. My legs hurt. My back hurt. My eyes hurt. My throat hurt. The only part of me that didn't hurt was my brain. That was so numb, I couldn't think.

I didn't know if he was a Martian or not. But something weird was going on. Wasn't it? And if it was just me — if I was going insane — then what right do I have to try to parent this child anyway? Either way I lose. If he's a Martian, I can't tell anyone. And if he isn't a Martian, then I'm going crazy.

I started looking for local evidence. I began browsing through my journal. I'd been making daily notes of interesting incidents, in case I ever wanted to write a book about our experiences. At first, I couldn't find anything. Most of the incidents I'd written about were fairly mundane. Not even good *Readers' Digest* material.

For instance, the week after he moved in, I'd taken him to the baseball game at Dodger Stadium. For the first part of the game, he'd been more interested in having a pennant and getting some cotton candy than in what was going on down on the stadium floor. But along about the fifth inning, he'd climbed up onto my lap and I began explaining the game to him. "See that man at home plate, holding the bat. Wish for him to hit the ball right out of the park."

"Okay," said Dennis.

Cra-a-ack! The ball went sailing straight out into the right field stands. Someone in the lower deck caught it and the runner sauntered easily around the bases while the organist played, "Glory, glory, Hallelujah."

"You're a good wisher, Dennis. That was terrific. Want to try it again?"

"No."

"Okay."

Two innings later, the Dodgers were one run behind. I asked Dennis to wish for hits again. Four pitches later, there were runners at first and third.

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It didn't matter to me who came up to bat now; I hadn't remembered the names of any ballplayers since Roy Campanella was catching for Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax. As far as I was concerned, Who was on first, What was on second, and I Don't Know still played third. I liked baseball only so long as I didn't have to be an expert; but I'd never seen the Dodgers win a game. Every time I came to the stadium they lost; so I'd made it a point to stay away from Dodger Stadium to give them a fair chance at winning. I didn't expect them to win tonight; but Dennis's wishes had brought them from three runs behind.

"Okay, Dennis," I said, giving him a little squeeze. "It's time for one last wish. See that guy at the home plate, holding the bat. You gotta wish for him to hit a home run. All the way out of the park. Just like before. Okay?"

"Okay."

And just like before — *cra-a-ack* — the ball went sailing deep into right field, triggering a sudden cluster of excited fans scrambling down across the seats.

The Dodgers won that night. All the way home, I kept praising Dennis for his excellent wishing.

A couple of weeks after that, we were stopped at a light, waiting for it to change. It was one of those intersections that existed slightly sideways to reality. Whenever you stopped there, time slowed down to a crawl. Without even thinking, I said, "Dennis, wish for the light to turn green please."

"Okay," he said.

— and abruptly the light turned green. I frowned. It seemed to me the cycle hadn't quite completed.

Nah. I must have been daydreaming. I eased the car through the intersection. A moment later, we got caught at the next red light. I said a word.

"Why'd you say that?"

"These lights are supposed to be synchronized," I said. "So you only get green ones. We must be out of synch. Why don't you wish for this light to change too please."

"Okay."

— green.

"Boy! You are really a *good* wisher."

"Thank you.

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A minute later, I said, "Can you wish this light to turn green too?"

"No," he said, abruptly angry. "You're going to use up all my wishes."

"Huh?" I looked over at him.

"I only have so many wishes and you're going to use them all up on stoplights." There was a hurt quality in his voice.

I pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped. I turned to him and put my hand gently on his shoulder. "Oh, sweetheart. I don't know who told you that, but that's not so. The wish bag is bottomless. You can have as many wishes as you want."

"No, you can't," he insisted. "I have to save my wishes for things that are important."

"What's the most important thing you ever wished for?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

He didn't answer.

"What's the most important wish?" I repeated.

Very softly, he admitted, "I wished for a dad. Someone who would be nice to me."

"Uh-huh. And did you get your wish?"

He nodded.

"So, you see, sweetheart. There's no shortage of miracles."

I didn't know if he believed me. It was still too early in the process. We were still learning who each other was. I noted the conversation in my journal and let the matter slide. But it left me with an uncomfortable feeling. What has to happen to a child to make him believe there's a limit to wishes?

A year later, I looked at the words I'd written glowing on the computer screen, and *wondered* about Dennis's ability to wish. It was probably a coincidence. But maybe it wasn't. That time we'd matched four out of six numbers in the lottery and won eighty-eight dollars — was that the week I'd asked him to wish real hard for us to win?

Maybe Martians have precognitive or telekinetic powers...?

Dennis likes cleaning things. Without asking, he'll go out and wash the car, or the patio. He'll give the dogs baths. He'll vacuum the rugs and take the dustbuster to the couch. He'll mop the floors. His favorite toys are a sponge and a squirt-bottle of Simple Green. I've seen him take a rusty old wrench he found in a vacant field and scrub the rust off of it until it shone like new. One night after dinner, after he finished methodically loading the dishwasher, I sat

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him down at the kitchen table and told him I had a surprise for him.

"What?"

"It's a book of puzzles."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed.

"No, listen. Here's the game. You have twenty minutes to do these puzzles, and then when you finish. I add them up and we'll find out how smart you are. Do you want to do this?"

"It'll really tell you how smart I am?"

"Uh-huh."

He grabbed for the book and a pencil.

"Wait a minute — let me set the timer. Okay? Now once you start, you can't stop. You have to go all the way through to the end. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Ready?"

"Ready."

"One, two, three...go."

He attacked the first three puzzles with a vengeance. They were simple. Pick the next shape in a series: triangle, square, pentagon...? Which object doesn't belong: horse, cow, sheep, scissors? Feather is to Bird as Fur is to: dog, automobile, ice cream...?

Then the puzzles started getting harder and he started to frown. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and once he stopped to clean his glasses; but he stayed interested and involved and when the timer went off, he didn't want to stop. He insisted that he be allowed to finish the puzzle he was working on. What the hell. I let him.

"What does it say?" Dennis asked as I computed the percentile. He wanted to grab the test book out of my hand.

"Well...let me finish here." I held it out of his reach as I checked the table of percentiles.

The test showed that he had above-average intelligence — not unexpected; hyperactive kids tend to be brighter than average — but well within the normal range for a nine-year-old. "It says that you are fifty-two inches high, that you weigh sixty-six pounds, and that your daddy loves you very much. It also says that you are very smart."

"How smart?"

"Well, if this test were given to one hundred children, you would be

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smarter than ninety-two of them."

"How good is that?"

"That's *very* good. You can't get much better. And it means we should go out for ice cream after dinner. What do you think?"

"Yeah!"

Oh, that was another thing. He didn't like chocolate. He preferred rainbow sherbet. I'd never seen that in a kid before.

A couple of weeks later, we played another game. I made sure to pick a quiet evening, one with no distractions. "This game is even harder," I explained. "It's a kind of card game," I explained. "See these cards? There are six different shapes here. A circle, a square, a star, three squiggly lines, a cross, and a figure-eight. All you have to do is guess which one I'm looking at. See if you can read my mind, okay?"

He frowned at me, and I had to explain it two or three more times. This was not a game he wanted to play. I said okay and started to put the deck away. If he didn't want to cooperate, the results would be inconclusive. "Can we go for ice cream after we do this?" he asked abruptly.

"Sure," I said.

"Okay, let's do it then."

"All right. We have to do it five times. Do you think you can do it that many times?"

He shrugged. I laid out a paper in front of him, showing him the shapes so he would be able remember them all. I told him he could close his eyes if it would help him concentrate. The test conditions were less than perfect, but if there were any precognitive or telepathic powers present, five trials should be enough to demonstrate them.

Half an hour later, I knew.

Martians aren't telepathic.

But they do like rainbow sherbet. A lot.

There were other tests. Not many. Not anything too weird. Just little ones that might indicate if there was something worth further investigation. There wasn't. As near as I could determine, there was nothing so unusual about Dennis that it would register as a statistical anomaly in a repeatable testable circumstance. He couldn't levitate. He couldn't move objects. He

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couldn't make things disappear. He didn't know how to *grok*. He could only hold his breath for thirty-three seconds. He couldn't *think* muscles. He couldn't see around corners.

But —

He *could* predict elevators. Take him into any building, anywhere. Take him to the elevator bank. Let him push the up button. Don't say a word. Without fail, the door he stands in front of will be the one where the first elevator arrives. Was he wishing them or predicting them? I don't know. It's useful only at science fiction conventions, which are legendary for recalcitrant elevators. It has little value anywhere else in the world.

He could make stop lights turn green — sometimes. Mostly, he waited until he saw the lights for the cross street turn yellow before he announced his wish. Maybe he could still make the Dodgers score four runs in two innings — but it wasn't consistent. We went back to Dodger Stadium in May, and either Dennis wasn't wishing or he really had used up all his wishes.

He *could* sing with perfect pitch, especially if the lyrics were about Popeye's gastrointestinal distress. He could play a video game for four hours straight without food or water. He could invent an amazing number of excuses for not staying in bed. He could also hug my neck so hard that once I felt a warning crack in my trachea. My throat hurt for a week afterward.

I began to think that *maybe* I had imagined the whole thing.

On school nights, I tucked him in at 9:30. We had a whole ritual. If there was time, we read a storybook together; whatever was appropriate. Afterward, prayers —

"I'm sorry God for...I didn't do anything to be sorry for."

"How about sassing your dad? Remember you had to take a timeout?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry God for sassing my dad. Thank you God for...um, I can't think of anything."

"Going swmming."

"No. Thank you God for Calvin, my cat."

"Good. Anything else you want to say to God?"

"Does God hear the prayers of Martians?"

"Uh...of course he does. God hears everybody's prayers."

"Not Martians."

"Yes, even Martians."

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"Uh-uh."

"Why do you say no?"

"Because God didn't make any Martians."

"If God didn't make the Martians, then who did?"

"The devil."

"Did the devil make you?"

"Uh-huh."

"How do you know?"

"Because...I'm a Martian."

"Mm," I said, remembering a little speech I'd made just about a year ago. *Let it be all right for him to be a Martian for as long as he needs to be.* "All right," I said. "But let me tell you a secret," I whispered. "The devil didn't make any Martians. That's just a lie the devil wants you to believe. God made the Martians."

"Really?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die. Stick a noodle in my eye."

"*How do you know?*" He was very insistent.

"Because I talk to God every night," I said. "Just like you, I say my prayers. And God made everything in the world."

"But Martians aren't from this world — "

"That's right. But God made Mars too. And everything on it. Just like she made this world, she made a whole bunch of others, and Mars was one of them. Honest."

"How come you say 'she' when you talk about God?"

"Because sometimes God is female and sometimes God is male. God is everything. And now it's time for you to stop asking questions and go to sleep. Hugs and kisses — ?"

"Hugs and kisses."

"G'night. No more talking."

"I love you."

"I love you too. Now no more talking."

"Dad?'

"What?"

"I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"I love you."

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"I love you too. Now, shhh. No more talking, Dennis."

"G'night."

"Sleep tight — "

Finally, I got smart. I stopped answering. Control freaks. We each wanted to have the last word.

I PADDED BAREFOOT DOWN the hall. I stopped in the living room long enough to turn off the television set, the VCR, and the surround-sound system. I continued on through the dining room and finally to my office. Two computers sat on my desk, both showing me that it was 9:47. The monster-child had manipulated an extra seventeen minutes tonight.

I sat down in my chair, leaned back, put my feet up on my desk, and stared out at the dark waters of the swimming pool in the back yard. The pool glowed with soft blue light. The night was...silent. Somewhere, a dog, barked.

Somewhere — that was his name, yes; he was a writer's dog — lived under my desk. When I said, "Let's go to work," wherever he was in the house, Somewhere would pick himself up and laboriously pad-pad-pad into my office where he'd squelch himself flat and scrooch his way under the desk, with a great impassioned Jewish sigh of, "I hope you appreciate what I do for you."

He'd stay there all day — as long as the computer was on. Somewhere would only come out for two things: cookies and the doorbell...and the doorbell was broken. It had been broken for as long as I'd lived in this house. I'd never had the need to get it fixed. If someone came to the door, the dog barked.

Somewhere, the dog, barked.

That was why I loved him so much. He was a living cliché. He was the only possible justification for one of the most infamous sentences in bad writing. It was just a matter of placing the commas correctly.

Somewhere had just enough intelligence to keep out of the way and more than enough intelligence to find his dinner dish — as long as no one moved it. He spent his mornings resting under my desk, his afternoons snoozing behind the couch, his evenings snoring next to Dennis; he spent the hours before dawn in the dark space underneath the headboard of my bed, dreaming about the refrigerator.

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Almost every night, just as Dennis began saying his prayers, Somewhere would come sighing down the hall, a shaggy, absent-minded canine-American. He'd step over everything that was in his way, uncaring if he knocked over a day's worth of Lego construction. He'd climb onto the bed, over my lap, over Dennis, grumbling softly as he found his position next to Dennis. With his prehensile tongue, he could slurp the inside of Dennis's right ear from the left side of his head, taking either the internal or external route.

Tonight, though, he knew I wasn't finished working. I had some serious thinking to do. He remained under the desk, sighing about the overtime. "You're in super-golden hours," I said to him; he shut up.

Whenever I'm in doubt about something, I sit down and start writing. I write down everything I'm feeling or thinking or worrying about. I say everything there is to say until there's nothing left to say. The first time I did this was the day after my dad died. I sat and wrote for two days. When I was finished, I had a Nebula nominated story, *In the Deadlands*. To this day I still don't fully understand what the story was about, but the emotional impact of it is undeniable. It still gives me the shudders.

But the lesson I learned from that experience was the most important thing I've ever learned about storytelling. Effective writing isn't in the mechanics. Anyone can master the mechanical act of stringing together words and sentences and paragraphs to make a character move from A to B. The bookstores are full of evidence. But that's not writing. Writing isn't about the words, it's about the experience. It's about the *feeling* that the story creates inside of you. If there's no feeling, there's no story.

But sometimes, there's only the feeling without any meaning or understanding. And that's not a story either. What I was feeling about Dennis was so confusing and troubling and uncertain that I couldn't even begin to sort it out. I needed to write down all the separate pieces — as if in the act of telling, it would sort itself out. Sometimes the process worked.

When I looked up again, three hours had passed. My back and shoulders ached. The dog had gone to bed, and I felt I had accomplished nothing at all except to delineate the scale of my frustration.

Why would an alien species come to this planet? The last time I spent that much time on this question, I came up with giant pink man-eating slugs in search of new flavors. Why would Martians send their children to Earth?

The most logical idea that I came up with was that they were

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here as observers. Spies.

Haven't you ever been pulling on your underwear and realized that your dog or your cat is watching you? Haven't you ever considered the possibility that the creature is sharing your secrets with some secret network of dogs and cats? *"Oh, you think that's weird? My human wears underwear with pictures of Rocky and Bullwinkle on them."*

But dogs and cats are limited in what they can observe. If you *really* want to know a culture, you have to be a member of it. But an alien couldn't step in and pretend to be a member of this culture, could he? He'd have to learn. He'd have to be taught....

Where could a Martian go to get lessons in being a human? Who gives lessons in human beingness?

Mommies and Daddies. That's right.

"You're too paranoid," said my sane friend. He asked me to leave his name out of this narrative, so I'll just call him my sane friend.

"What do you mean?"

"You think that aliens are all motivated by evil intentions. You've written four novels about evil aliens eating our children, and you're working on a fifth. Isn't it possible that you're wrong?"

"*Moi?* Wrong?"

"Do you ever think about the cuckoo?" my sane friend asked.

"No," I said.

"Well, think about the cuckoo for a moment."

"Okay."

"How do you feel about the cuckoo?" he asked.

"It's an evil bird," I said. "It lays its egg in the sparrow's nest. The cuckoo chick pushes the other babies out of the nest. The sparrow ends up raising it — even at the expense of her own young. It's a parasite."

"See, that's your judgment talking — "

"That's the truth — " I started to object.

"Is it? Is that what you tell Dennis about his birth-mother?"

"Uh — I tell him that his birth-mom couldn't take care of him. And that she loves him and misses him. And that's the truth. Sort of...whitewashed."

My sane friend grinned at me.

"Okay," I admitted. "I'm protective of my son. So what?"

My sane friend shrugged. "How do you think the cuckoo feels?"

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"Birds don't feel."

"If it could feel, how do you think it would feel?"

I thought about it. The first image that came to mind was the silly little bird from the Dr. Seuss story; the one who flew off, leaving Horton the elephant to hatch her egg. I shook my head. "I'm not getting anything useful — "

"How do you think Dennis's mother feels?"

I shook my head again. "Everything I've heard about her...I can't empathize."

"All right, try it this way. Under what circumstances would *you* give Dennis up?"

"I'd die before I'd give him up," I said. "He makes me happier than anybody I've ever known before. Just looking at him, I get an endorphin rush. If anybody started proceedings to take him out of my home, I'd have him on a plane to New Zealand so fast — " I stopped. "Oh, I see what you mean." I thought about it. "If I wasn't able to take care of him, or if I thought I was hurting him, or if I thought I wasn't doing a good enough job — " There was that old *familiar* twinge again. "If I thought he'd *really* be better off with someone else, I'd want him to have the best chance possible. But I just can't see that happening."

"Uh-huh...." My sane friend grinned. "*Now*, how do you think the Martians feel?"

"Huh?"

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He repeated the questions.

I thought about it for a while. "I'd have to assume that if they have the capability to implant their children in human wombs that they would have a highly developed science and technology and that implies — to me anyway — a highly developed emotional structure and probably a correspondingly well-developed moral structure as well. At least, that's what I'd like to believe."

"And if what you believe is true..." he started to say.

I finished the thought for him. "...then the Martians are trusting us with their children."

"Aren't they?" he asked.

I didn't answer. I didn't like where that train of thought might lead. But I followed it anyway.

"Would you trust your child to apes or wolves?" my sane friend asked.

"No," I said. "You know what happens to feral children."

He nodded. "I've read the same books you have."

"So, if the Martians are trusting us with their children...then that implies that either they don't care about their children very much — or they do."

"You want my best guess?"

"This is where you resolve everything for me, isn't it?"

"No. This is where I tell you what I think. I think they're engaged in a long-term breeding experiment...to upgrade the level of intelligence and compassion in the human race."

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"Yeah?" I gave him my best raised-eyebrow look. "Remember what happened to Spock? He was a half-breed too. His parents wanted to breed a logical human. Instead, they got an emotional Vulcan."

"Have you got a better guess?"

"No," I admitted. "But what kind of Martians *are* we raising?"

"What kind of Martian are *you* raising?" he corrected.

And that really did it for me. That was the question. "I don't know," I finally admitted. "But — he is mine to raise, isn't he?"

"Yep," my sane friend agreed.

That thought echoed for a long long moment. Finally, I acknowledged the truth of it with a grin. "Yeah," I said. "I can live with that...."

As a literary puzzle, this is incomplete. As a story, it doesn't work. There's no ending.

There isn't enough evidence for me to even *suggest* a conclusion. What do we know about the Martians? For that matter, what do we really know about ourselves? There's nothing to extrapolate. And if the Martians are really engaged in some kind of large-scale genetic engineering, we won't really know what their intentions are until the Martian children start reaching adulthood. Dennis will be old enough to vote in 2005. (And that raises *another* question. *How long* have the Martians been planting their babies in human homes? Maybe we *already* live in a Martian-influenced world?)

Maybe the Martian children will be super geniuses, inventing cold fusion and silicon sentience and nanotechnological miracles — Stephen Hawking and Buckminster Fuller. Maybe they'll be spiritual saviors, bringing such superior technology of consciousness that those of us brave enough to follow will achieve the enlightenment of saints. Maybe they'll be demagogues and dictators. Or maybe they'll be madmen and all end up in institutions. And maybe they'll be monsters, giving us a new generation of serial killers and cult-leaders — Jack the Ripper and Charles Manson.

All we can do is wait and see how it works out.

There's one more thing.

In reviewing the material for this story, I came across a curious coincidence. Kathy Bright had given me several huge stacks of reports on Dennis, written by various therapists and counselors. I hadn't had time to read them all, and after the first few, I stopped — I didn't want *their* experience of Dennis;

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I wanted to make up my own mind. But as I paged through the files, looking for Martian stuff, one of them caught my eye. On Saturday, June 27th, 1992, Carolyn Green (his counselor) had noted, "Dennis thinks God doesn't hear his prayers, because he wished for a dad and nothing happened."

I first saw Dennis's picture on Saturday, June 27th, 1992, at about two in the afternoon. According to Carolyn Green's report, that was the exact time of his weekly session. I cannot help but believe that he was wishing for a dad at the exact moment I first saw his picture. *A Martian wish.* Was that what I felt so strongly?

Does it mean anything? Maybe. Maybe not. In any case, I know better than to argue with Martian wishes. Tonight, at bed time, he wished for me to be happy.

I had to smile. "Was that a Martian wish?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, in a voice that left no room for disagreement.

"Then, I'm happy," I said. And in fact, I was.

I hadn't realized it before, because I hadn't acknowledged it, not even to myself; but as I walked back down the hall to my office, I had to admit that I was glowing. I'd gotten everything I'd wanted, a wonderful son, a profound sense of family, a whole new reason for waking up in the morning. So what if he's a Martian, it really doesn't matter, does it? He's my *son,* and I love him. I'm not giving him up. He's *special.*

When Dennis puts his mind to it, he can predict elevators and make stoplights turn green and help the Dodgers win baseball games. He can make lottery tickets pay off (a little bit, four numbers at a time) and he can wish a father into his life. That's pretty powerful stuff.

I think we might experiment with that a little bit more. We haven't bought any lottery tickets in a while. Maybe we should buy a couple tonight. And if that works, who knows what else he could wish for. I was thinking of asking him to wish for a Hugo award for his dad — just a test, you understand — but this morning, he announced he was going to wish for a mom instead. I'll be *very* interested to see how that one works out.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWARD

This story is, to the best of my knowledge, a work of fiction.

Yes, I have an adopted son. Yes, his name is Dennis. No, he is not a Martian.

I asked him if he was. He said he wasn't. Then he came over and whispered in my ear, "I said no because we're not supposed to tell."

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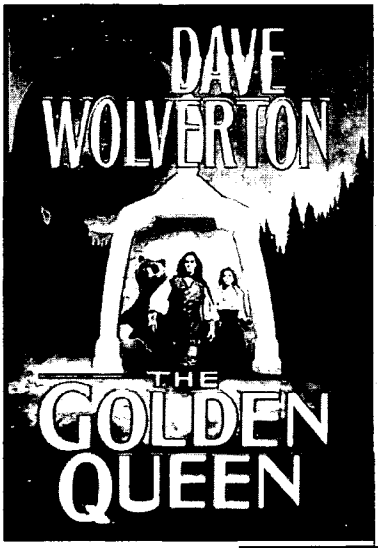

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